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The Dressing – Less Capris and More Knees! – by Marcy Lytle

I'm into dresses this summer. They're so versatile and I've put them on the back burner for years, in favor of jeans and capris, and maybe a few skirts now and then. But there are so many cute dresses out there on the racks this season, and they're quite affordable if you know where to look! I've not worn dresses in the summer because I don't fancy nylon slips, but there are other options!

Here are some fun ideas of dresses to wear this summer, with cute sneakers or slides or heels or even booties! Buy yourself some tanning lotion and use it all summer long to give your skin an even hue and a bit of color. Purchase <u>a long tank top</u> (that goes below your butt and preferable to your mid-thigh!) to wear for a "slip" underneath. Then you're good to go!

https://www.maurices.com/product/basic-tunic-layering-tank/104490?FamilySKU=104490&prodSKU=24072944&mr:trackingCode=D629CB7C-40D1-E811-80FE-0050569428E8&mr:referralID=NA&mr:device=c&mr:adType=plaonline&camp=PLA|RTN|GOOG|STND|c|NA|CORE|shopping brand low priority pla|24072944||kid: k EAlalQobChMI1rvqldDF4QIVpBx9Ch0magb7EAYYAiABEgL7mPD BwE k |||315021318142||&gclid=EAlalQobChMI1rvqldDF4QIVpBx9Ch0magb7EAYYAiABEgL7mPD BwE

The criteria I used in searching for these fun dresses included sleeve and dress length – so I hope you enjoy and can find the ones you love! And of course, keep that classic jean skirt (like the one pictured above) to wear all summer long, as well!

Gingham wrap – Isn't this cute? If you're wearing your long white tank underneath, it will serve as a slip and make sure coverage is there! It comes in a couple of colors, and the price is right!

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=416544012&cid=1114843&pcid=15292

Floral Swing – Look at the sleeves and the "swing" in this black and white dress for spring/summer. Can you just imagine it with red sandals or yellow, or any color at all! And what about a pair of cute sneakers?

https://oldnavy.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=390760102&cid=1114235&pcid=15292

Scarf wrap – Scarf dresses are in this season, and this one just screams in color and prettiness! This is a great vacation dress to pack and wear, and enjoy for an evening out on the town.

https://www.burkesoutlet.com/shop/women-womens-stripe-floral-print-wrap-dress-red-mul-2035008918569/

Linen Midi –Check out the stripes and the belted waist and the cute sleeves and the pockets on this dress. I love the way it's made, and it looks like it would be cool even on the hottest of summer days. They even show you how to style it if you scroll down!

https://www.francescas.com/product/blakely-linen-midi-dress.do?sortby=ourPicks&refType=&from=fn&ecList=7&ecCategory=106120

Peaches and Cream – If you like a looser fit and a softer color scheme; check out this amazing dress. Super cute flowy sleeves are fun, and be sure to check out the back view as well! I want this one!

https://www.worldmarket.com/product/daphnes-stp-drss-s.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=fn

Stripes, Anyone? – Another loose fitting dress that can be dressed up or down, with sneakers or sandals, with jewelry or a head scarf, with a purse or a clutch! Grab one before they're gone!

https://www.zara.com/us/en/striped-dress-p04215310.html?v1=11459039&v2=1180719

Fit and Flare – The coral and navy, the sheer and the mint background, make this a perfect dress for summer weddings or gatherings where you need to dress up, just a little!

https://www.jcpenney.com/p/studio-1-short-sleeve-fit-flare-

<u>dress/ppr5007814235?pTmplType=regular&catId=cat100210008&deptId=dept20000013&urlState=/g/womens-dresses/N-</u>

<u>bwo3xD1nnujcZ1feZy1q&sort=NA&productGridView=medium&badge=new&selectedSKUId=22</u> 358340224&facetSelected=size range

Consider finding a few dresses to hang in your closet and wear this next season. Stop in some of your favorite discount stores and find some more dresses at super low prices and buy several! You can always add a cardigan if you're chilly indoors, and then wear these dresses on into the fall by adding tights and booties! Enjoy the hunt!

Seven 4 You - "Summerize" - by Marcy Lytle

This year I took forever to put away my winter décor, my light-up snowman, and other cold season rugs, pillows and accessories. Winter seemed to linger a bit longer here than usual, and I just wasn't ready to store the cozy throws and blankets just yet. However, May is here, warmer weather is for sure here to stay for the months ahead, and a refresher in each room of the house is so fun and makes our homes so cheery! We don't have to add clutter, but we can add color...and other prettiness to "summerize" (nope, that's not a word, but I like it.)

In the kitchen: Consider setting out bowls of fresh fruit, adding a fresh tea towel over your oven door (not to be used!), lighting a candle in a fragrance of fruit or herbs, and/or a pretty tray or a fresh vase of flowers. One idea is to set out a vase and fill it full of store bought baby's breath, and then just add a few fresh flowers or herbs. Baby's breath is your staple, so just adding pops of color is fun and fresh. And pick a vase with color as well, not just a clear one! We love this pretty idea of a sea blue vase grouping from Kirklands! http://www.kirklands.com/product/Sea-Blue-Glass-Vase/224576.uts

In the family room: Toss those heavy throws in dark hues in favor of lighter ones...or remove some of the throw pillows and create more space! Look at your room and see if there's one pop of color you can add with one new accessory. My living area is mostly grays and oranges, with touches of mustard. However, I decided to pull out the teal hue from one of the pillows, with my new throw this season...from Target! Place fresh table runners – there are some really cute inexpensive fabric in the dollar section ones Target, well! https://www.target.com/p/textured-stripe-with-corner-tassels-throw-blanket-white-blue-opalhousehttps://www.target.com/p/72-x14-jungle-leaf-with-tassels-table-runner-green-153/-/A-54085404 opalhouse-153/-/A-54135343

In the guest bath: This bathroom may be the only room many of your guests see, besides the family area and kitchen, so make it pretty! Keep a neutral background but change out accessories that speak summer. A fresh hand towel can be your palette, and go from there. World Market has beautiful ones! I found this fun rain boot vase on the shelves at a discount store, and I love adding in these tall stalks for height in the corner. Set out a pretty candle and fresh hand soap in one of the colors from your hand towel. And finally, wash your rugs and think about a new one! <a href="https://www.worldmarket.com/category/bed-bath/bath-towel-collections/hand+towels.do?template=PLA&plfsku=458105&mrkgcl=660&mrkgadid=3172036563&camp=ppc%3AGoogle%3APLA%2BMerkle Shopping PLA%7CBrand%2BBrand%7CTextiles&product_id=458105&adpos=1o2&creative=166018777351&device=c&matchtype=&network=g&gclid=EAlalQobChMl9a375am24QIVph6tBh3S7gfEEAQYAiABEgIZ4fD_BwE

In your bedroom: No one goes in here uninvited, right? But you live there daily and nightly! Sometimes, this room gets neglected the most. First of all, clear the clutter! Clear every shelf and surface so that what you place back is minimal and speaks of rest and calm. Battery operated lights are so fun in the bedroom because they can be placed anywhere, even if a plug is not nearby. There are super cute ones to be found in discount stores. Check out this navy one from Burke's Outlet, and this Edison-type one found at Marshalls. A green plant and a

pretty candle is all you need in one grouping, and a few new books for reading in another! In the evening, create atmosphere by turning off the overhead lights and opting for those cute ones you set around the room. https://www.lampsplus.com/products/libby-seeded-glass-12-inch-high-edison-bulb-accent-lamp y9401.html

In your bathroom: This room gets everything leftover, doesn't it? Old towels, clutter of all sorts of lotions and potions, and just general – ehh. Clear your surfaces and pop in a lamp for ambience. Set out new hand towels in spring colors, and hand soap as well. That's simple...and you're done! https://www.worldmarket.com/product/desert-home-fresh-aloe-liquid-hand-soap.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=Search

In your office: My office is on a different laptop in three spots in the house! My favorite though, where I spend the most time, is at a roll-top desk in my bedroom. I love having one grouping that attracts my eye and my sense of smell just above me. And on the nearby window, I have a wreath hanging in front of the blinds. When they're open, it's such a pretty view out at the backyard. Just change up one thing, and clear out a bunch of things, so that when you're working you're smiling. https://www.worldmarket.com/product/paddywax-lemon-and-rosemary-old-fashioned-filled-candle.do?sortby=ourPicks&from=Search

In your closet: Okay, so maybe no one decorates a closet. But minimalizing and cleaning out can make it look decorated and clean and inviting! Go through your clothes and shoes and toss – donate – give away! Use your wall space for hanging pretty necklaces. Corral the shoes you've kept and only display a couple. Line up your bags so that you can easily carry that summer purse that you forgot you had! And organize your clothes by color or length...and by all means get rid of those metal hangers! Make your closet a place you want to linger instead of run from...

In March, we talked about a pretty porch for spring, and now we've given tips for a summery house for the next season. As you're out and about, take a list of the colors of your house or even take a few photos of your sofa, your bedroom, your bathroom, etc. so that if you see something – you can imagine it before you buy it. Keep in mind your color scheme, and think outside the box. If you see a pretty metal bird and you think it would accent your mantel, go for it! And finally, you can ask a friend if you're not confident in your choosing...but I bet your ideas are awesome. Let your home speak of what you like and enjoy, not what others tell you to like and enjoy.

Summerize. Coin the word. Make it happen.

Selah's Style – A Mermazing Party

Selah's cousin Ayla had a birthday last month and the theme was mermaids! She enjoyed helping her mom put together the decorations, party favors, games and food for all of her guests which included school friends, neighbors and church friends. Birthdays are a big deal at Ayla's house and her mom is quite *mermazing* herself, as a cake baker and party planner. Ayla hopes you enjoy the pictures of how the party went down...into the sea!

Ayla's friend Maddie came over to decorate Ayla's face right before she got dressed for the party. After all, what's a mermaid birthday party without a mermaid?

The cake was the star of the party in three layers of all of the colors and textures of the sea! Check out the beautiful tower Ayla's mom made that included a layer of chocolate, strawberry and vanilla flavors!

Sandwiches were PB& J, all of the kids' favorite, but they were cut into star shapes (big and small) using cookie cutters. These were not only cute but tasty, too!

It was fun plopping the sea blue jello into cups and then setting free a Swedish gummy fish to swim on top. Each kid was served one of these!

Check out the cute plates and the big life-size mermaid décor for the table – all from Target – that place where Ayla's mom finds most everything she needs for the kids!

To hold the drinks, Ayla's Ella (grandmother) found these \$5 jars at Five Below, in teal blue, and they worked great!

Ayla and her friends lined up for a game of Pin the Tail on the Mermaid, and every participant got a candy for trying. This was the main game played inside, because it was pouring outside!

Finally, Ayla and her dad enjoyed making slime for the party favors and wrapping them up as party favors for every friend as they left the party. Slime is Ayla's favorite!

Opening gifts is always fun at a party, but friends and food and family are the best, always!

In the Kitchen – Burgers and Dips – by Marcy Lytle

Did you know that International Hamburger day is the end of this month, on the 28th? I didn't either. But why not note it, and share with you some burger recipes for the warmer months ahead, when we all start picnicking, grilling, and having friends over for food! The recipes we are sharing this month are easy and so yummy. I hope you try them all!

Sirloin sliders

These were super easy to make and looked so cute – and were totally tasty! The cheese was delish! I'm not a meat lover, but these tiny burgers were just right for me...and him!

- White bread, cut into 3in rounds
- 1 lb ground sirloin
- 2-3 cloves garlic, grated
- 3-4 T grated onion
- 1 T paprika
- Salt and pepper

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Place the rounds on a sheet and bake til lightly toasted, 8-10 minutes. Combine the meat with above ingredients and form tiny burgers to fit the rounds (make a speck bigger as they will shrink when cooking). Heat a bit of oil in a large griddle pan or cast iron skillet and cook 3-4 minutes per side.

- 2 T butter
- 2 T flour
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 3 T well drained pimientos
- 1 T yellow mustard
- Several drops hot sauce
- Thick dill pickle chips

In a saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat, whisk in flour and milk and simmer to thicken, season with S&P. Melt in the cheese and stir in the pimientos, mustard and hot sauce.

Divide the patties among the rounds, top with the cheese sauce and another round, then garnish with toothpick stuck through each pickle!

Salsa black bean burgers

These veggie burgers are so tasty and hold together very well when cooking, unlike some others I've tried! They don't take long to put together or cook, and even taste good cold – when packed in a lunch. We added a dollop of guacamole to top them off!

Ingredients:

- 1 can rinsed and drained black beans
- 2/3 cup dry bread crumbs
- 1 Roma tomato seeded and finely chopped
- 1 jalapeno seeded and finely chopped
- 1 egg
- 1 T minced cilantro
- 1 garlic clove minced
- 1 T olive oil
- 4 whole wheat buns

Place beans in a food processor and process until blended. Transfer to a large bowl, and add in the rest of the ingredients and mix. Shape into four patties.

Heat oil in large skillet and cook patties over med heat for 4-6 minutes on each side til lightly browned. Serve on buns and top with guacamole and/or red onion! Delish!

Carrot Hummus

So pretty in color and so yummy in flavor, this dip is great with pita chips. You can make these at home too, by cutting pita bread into triangles spread with a bit of oil and salt, and then baking in the oven at 375 until crisp!

On a baking sheet toss and then roast at 425 degrees until tender, about 15 minutes, and let cool.

- 1 lb chopped peeled carrots
- 1 T olive oil
- ½ ground cumin

In the food processor, puree these ingredients with the cooled carrots:

- 1 can drained and rinsed chickpeas
- ½ c tahini
- 3 T fresh lemon juice
- 1 small clove garlic
- 3-4 T ice water
- Salt

Place in a bowl and drizzle with plain Greek yogurt, sprinkle with paprika, toss on top a good amount of chopped smoked almonds, and cilantro leaves. (The almonds make this dip sing!)

Chunky Guacamole

This didn't take long to make, and it just might be the best tasting guacamole ever. The added bacon and grilled corn enhance the flavor so much! You'll want this for your first picnic of the season!

- 3 avocados (or 2 large)
- ½ cup diced white onion
- ½ cup diced plum tomato
- ½ cup chopped cilantro
- Lime juice and salt to taste
- 2 ears of corn kernels cut off the cob and grilled
- 6 slices cooked and crumbled bacon
- 1/3 cup chopped pickled jalapenos

Cook and crumble the bacon. Cut the kernels off the ears and grill in a tiny bit of the bacon grease. Mash the avocados and mix in the onion, tomato, cilantro, lime juice and salt to taste. Add in the crumbled bacon and grilled corn. Serve with tortilla chips.

Tried and True - Praise of Song – by Marcy Lytle

He was SO cute. He stood up on the back of the sofa and pointed to a sign his mom had hanging on the wall that read, "God is good, all the time. He put a song of praise in this heart of mine." Only he got a few words switched around and said, "praise of song." I loved capturing that part on video, and hope you enjoy it as well!

When I left his house that day, I kept thinking about the phrase, "praise of song," and realized how true that is! The praise of song is one of the best ways to offer up adoration to Him, to lift our own spirits, and to be reminded of how music can change the foulest of moods!

So, thank you, Augie!

Here are 10 songs that I hope you keep on your play list and take a listen. Some are inspirational, and others are just great lyrics to a great beat. Feel free to comment below and add your own song to the list, for other readers as they visit this page!

- "Explaining Jesus" by Jordy Searcy I love this simple song by this young man about the love of Jesus and how we've so many times mispresented him to those around us. I think you'll enjoy the words, the tune, and the ending...https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vydjYkZwo50
- 2. "Give Me Jesus" by Danny Gokey This singer was American Idol or The Voice, I'm not sure which. And this is an old song. However, his voice and passion bring it to new life! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbh43MGoigw
- 3. "Great is Thy Faithfulness" by Sara Groves She's one of my favorite artists. She's mellow, the music is amazing, and the lyrics are truth. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTLfQ05Otk0
- 4. "Head above Water" by Avril Lavigne This is a secular artist that suffered with a physical illness, and then wrote this song. I hope the lyrics speak to you if you're in a storm. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKF6ghfcQic
- 5. "Come Along" by Pentatonix I'm pretty sure this song is not referring to heaven, but when I heard it I thought of heaven. And that's a good thing, right? Anything this group sings is awesome, and this one is spectacular. Put on your dancing shoes! https://www.youtube.com/results?search_guery=come+along+pentatonix
- 6. "The Breakup Song" by Francesca Battistelli Are you so over being afraid? So am I. So this song is for both of us! Enjoy. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0wpP5o7xpl
- 7. "That's What Makes You Strong" by Chris Gage and Christine Albert not the best recording, but I absolutely LOVE the lyrics about what makes us strong that which makes us weak. We heard this duo sing in person, and the song has stuck with me. Listen to the lyrics "lets the meek come sit beside the king!" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atpCddFzkD4
- 8. "Priceless" by King and Country I just found this one while searching for the others above. These guys are Rebecca St. James' brothers cool fact! And it's a cool fact that this song is from a movie *Priceless* watch it if you haven't seen it! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu5HGgrskQg

- 9. "Better than a Hallelujah" by Amy Grant an oldie but goodie. She was around when I was first introduced to contemporary Christian music. We've all grown, thankfully, and I love the sentiment in this song about what God loves from us...so beautiful and simple. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rm5kx3xqmg0
- 10. "You Say" by Lauren Daigle sang by Cimorelli I love Lauren Daigle sing her song, but when I heard this new group sing it, I fell in love with it again. What a powerful song for all of us to hear daily, weekly, maybe minute by minute...



Practical Parenting - Another Party? – by Marcy Lytle

I hear it now, and I heard it then, and nothing has changed. Our kids get invited to so many birthday parties that we would go broke if we attended them all. And our kids want elaborate extravaganzas for their own parties that require an extra bank account to serve! Birthday parties are supposed to be a celebration of the birthday person, not part of a demonstration of exhaustion and frustration! And yet, every weekend there's another gift to buy, and every other month there's another party to plan.

One of the best pieces of advice, before we get down to the practical, is that parties (just like weddings) do NOT have to succumb to the *pie in the sky* that our culture screams at us, "You must have!" We have to step back and away from getting on that band wagon. We also have to let go of what others think if we show up in hand with a homemade gift or just a card with \$5 in it. We have to do what works for our family and be glad about it. We just have to! And if they don't like our gift, maybe that's one less party we'll be invited to next time...

Here are some practicalities to consider in party gifting and going, planning and inviting.

The gifting and going:

It's okay to decline. Our children don't have to show up at every party. Family time comes first. If schedules are too full, we can elect to only choose a few parties to attend – not by popularity – but maybe by praying and attending those where we feel we are most needed.

It's okay that only one of your kids is invited. The whole clan doesn't have to go everywhere. We cannot expect that five year old to invite all four of our kids, ages 3 to 12. We can either take our one child, or stay home. And if time is an issue, don't stay for the entire party. We can let go of what we think others expect and demand, and do what is healthy and wise for our clan.

It's okay to budget your giving. If \$5 works for you, because you have no time to shop and no more funds to spare, then smile and give. A gift of an invite is a great idea – write in the card "You're invited to come over after school next Thursday to play," and I'm betting the kid will squeal with delight. Purchase a color by number book and a pack of markers from the Dollar Tree - \$2 – You're done. Store up a bin of these types of gifts as you have monies, and draw from it when parties near.

It's okay if she thinks you're awful because you went to that party and not her kid's party. You cannot please everyone, and remember you won't be pleased by everyone, either. We can just be polite and kind; and others can accept that or not.

The planning and inviting:

If having lots of folks and families, don't serve lunch! Have the party later and only include a few snacks that are kid-friendly. The adults can eat at home. We do not have to serve the parents! And it's perfectly fine to state in the invitation that snacks will be provided for the kids only.

If it works for your sanity, give your kids a choice: a party with several friends, a sleepover with a few friends, an outing with one friend. Decide on a budget and stick with it.

If it's a party with several friends, the party favor can be ONE lollipop from the Dollar Tree – it doesn't have to be bag full of 10 items. Snacks can be homemade or store bought, whatever works for you. And just state on the invitation what food you're serving, and let the parent decide whether or not their child with allergies can attend. You CANNOT provide every option for every child with every need – let the parent of that child provide.

Use the Dollar Tree or Oriental Trading (online) for decorations and don't spend more than you have. And if decorations stress you out, minimalize and chill! Look around your house and use what you have – beach buckets for serving, scarves for tablecloths, blankets for spreading out for picnics, bandanas for napkins or wrapping small gifts, etc. You can even string Christmas lights across the table and it will look fantastic! Bring your potted plants inside to create color!

If a sleepover is the choice, make the food simple. Each item doesn't have to be cut into shapes or covered with decorative icing. Make a plan for the evening, so that kids don't run amuck. For example, picnic on the floor, game time, dance time, movie time, bedtime reading, lights out. Hang the party schedule on the wall (and the rules.) Decide on a bedtime. And keep breakfast simple, as well. Pancakes with a few toppings, and you're done.

If an outing with one friend is chosen, give choices like an amusement center, mini golf, a movie, etc. and perhaps one place to eat like a fast food chain, an ice cream stop, or even a tea shop. Figure the cost before going so you're not fainting when you see the bill.

Above all, **talk with your children**. Don't portray "woe is me" attitudes that the family cannot afford this or that, or criticize others for the parties they throw, or compare and contrast. None of that does anyone any good! Instead, talk about the excitement of giving to others, and how God sees our heart, and that gifts are not more important if they cost more. Practice gratefulness at home with each other, so that kids are grateful at parties.

Even with all of the above, our kids are going to whine sometimes, wish they had gotten this instead of that, stomp around because they can't attend that party, or pout because they can't have 25 kids over. It happens. However, as we practice kindness and gratefulness in front of them, and talk about the goodness in our lives instead of the lack...they'll eventually grow up and get it.

At least, most of them...

(In the party pictured above – the dino board was taken from one of the kids' bedrooms and used as table décor, the food labels were made on the printer at home, and the food itself was simple and easy!)

I Don't Do Teenagers - Prom Night - by Marcy Lytle

It's that time of year, when our kids get invited (or not) to prom. I remember it well. There's shopping for the dress, the questions of how late can we stay out, where should he take her to dinner, etc. And then there are our thoughts of whether or not our almost grown children should even go, and what if they get into trouble, and all of the angst that comes with yet another one of those things we as parents have to face in raising kids. Here they sit as soon-to-be graduates, and all of these emotions and questions arise:

What if I don't get asked to senior prom, or who do I ask to go with me? Our healthy teenagers need to be assured that being asked to prom or asking someone is not the most important thing in life. Yes, it can be fun to be asked, but whether or not we are does not determine our worth or value. If he/she definitely desires to go, then encourage them to ask or seek out a couple of friends and go as a group. If he/she feels pressured to go but doesn't want to, let them make that decision. Prom night is not the queen's coronation – at all! Let them plan something equally as fun that they like to do, should they choose to skip.

What do I wear to the prom? It's got to be perfect. Talk that thought process down. Ask her what she likes, give her a budget, and encourage her to be herself. She can visit a thrift store, design her own outfit, or re-create with what she has in her closet (and borrow something from yours!). If a designer gown is in the budget, then give a top dollar amount. He doesn't have to perform up to others' standards, either. Encourage teens to dress appropriately, within budget, and to express themselves nicely. And most of all, they can dress with pride, regardless of whether or not others compliment or snub.

How late can I stay out? There is NO good reason to have kids stay out all night. At least that's this mom's opinion. Prom night is not about breaking rules or boundaries, but rather about having a fun time with others. If they want to stay out later than usual, invite a few kids over to your house for a movie and karaoke, and stay up a bit later to chaperone (discreetly, of course.) Kids have to be trustworthy, and we know if their track record has proven this. Have a conversation and listen to their pleas, but be wise and caring as parents...and safe...with your decision making.

But they're flying in a helicopter to prom! I don't know if this is still a thing, but I know that with every celebration there comes a competition to be the best. Whether it's a gender reveal, a wedding reception, or even this month's prom – our kids want to stand out and amaze others. We get it. Standing out and above is exhilarating and fun. However, talk this down too! This attitude in life will get our kids nowhere except with an ulcer and exhausted. Make their drive in the family car special, maybe with a surprise gift basket on the seat – filled with fun items for the evening of their choice. *Special* doesn't have to be seen by others; in fact, it only has to be given and enjoyed in love.

There's this pressure to perform, Mom! It's an age-old expectation among teens to push the limits on prom night, sexually, with drugs, with driving, etc. Teens will talk big and act out, just to make a show and to have a story to share the next day. We HAVE to talk with our teens and ask them about this particular pressure and how to deal. Insist that they stay in groups, walk

away at the sight of trouble, and be strong and courageous to say no. That's the real hero in any story. And tell them we are available for text, to come pick up, or for encouragement as the night wears on. Encourage them to be the thermostat and not the thermometer – to set the tone for the night and not to display the tone others set for them.

Finally, be the parent. Pray together about prom night...why not? We're supposed to pray about everything. We can encourage our kids to pray and listen and obey, out of love for their heavenly Father. We can praise them for doing the right thing, and reward them for being wise and strong.

It's hard, all of these growing-up stepping stones our kids place their feet upon. However, if those stones are settled into good ground, their feet won't slip, and they'll make it across into adulthood with a sound mind and a self-image that shines.

Tiny Living – On the Road Again – by Leyanne Enterline

On the road again,

I just can't wait to get on the road again.

The lyrics above are fitting for where we're at right now. My hubby got a job that keeps him on the road quite often now. It has been my dream to homeschool and travel with him. So that has been happening a lot! From Florida, to New Mexico, California, Houston, and (more to come), we have been on the road!

I thought the travel sounded pretty glamorous at first, but I got to see firsthand all the craziness that goes into production and it's not exactly all that I thought. Therefore, we've lessened some of the travel a bit and let him go alone. In taking this adventure, we may have added some stress, but for the most part it has been fun.

I still have not become a professional packer like I wanted to be. That is the hardest part, especially living in hotels with no washer/dryer and kitchen. Although packing is a bit difficult to me, I won't complain, because I did ask for this!

One thing I've learned while traveling is to be more specific in my prayer life and to make sure I ask if what I'm doing is God's will. What I may think is best may not be what God has in store and He knows what's best for me!

Another thing is that tiny living has gotten smaller! Our hotel rooms have definitely been less space than the trailer! So maybe trailer living was preparing us for this crazy adventure. When we get back I really appreciate our separate bedrooms, an actual kitchen and at least a laundry bin where we place our dirty clothes. Even if I do have to take them up the road to my parents' house to wash, I am okay with that! And it's nice to have something we can call our own. I just thought my trailer fridge was small, but a hotel fridge (if they have one) is much smaller! So I am beyond grateful for my tiny place!

Being on the road has really sparked an interest in our kiddos. They love the new places and new experiences. I make them journal everywhere we go and I really enjoy looking back on what they wrote! They, in fact, told us they want to take a break from baseball in the fall and just travel as much as we can. Even if it's camping everywhere, (okay, now my space will be even smaller) they want to go! We told them we would try our best, but had to remind them that we had to be adults and work some to make this adventure happen! Even if they can do school on the road, we can't always do our work on the road.

We shall see how long this lasts, but we are trying to enjoy the adventure and the freedom we have.

Remember...

Love Grows Best in Tiny Spaces

A Night to Remember – Doing Good – by Marcy Lytle

We've been studying goodness with a group of friends. In that study, we talked about how Jesus went about doing good. He healed the sick, sat with sinners, talked to the outcasts, and befriended his enemies. It's amazing to observe and see what Jesus did, but it's even more amazing to practice those things in our daily lives...with our kids!

In the month of May, let's teach our kiddos about doing good for moms that just might be in one of those categories listed above!

Preparation: You'll need construction paper and markers, and stickers, and a few gift bags with tissue, or use giftwrap and package décor you already have! Also have a big tray of homemade cookies fresh from the oven (or the store). Purchase ahead of time, 10 of the dollar toiletries from Dollar Tree i.e. lotion, chapstick, tissues, etc. Gather around the table for your devo together.

...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power,

and he went around doing good and healing all...

Act 10:38

<u>Widowed mature moms</u> – These are moms that have lost their husbands, their kids are grown, and they sit all alone in their houses. Think of at least one widow in your circle of friends and make her cards to hand deliver the weekend of Mother's Day.

<u>Single moms with kids at home</u> – These are moms who are raising kids all by themselves. Take the cookies you've made and decorate a pretty tray or box, and prepare to leave on her porch one evening as your family is out running errands.

<u>New moms</u> – These are the ladies who just had babies and they are trying to get used to crying and feeding and diaper changing! Maybe there's one in your neighborhood! Take your sack and stuff it with some of the toiletries for her, decorating and including cards of encouragement, wrapping each one with tissue paper.

<u>That special mom</u> – Think of a mom that's special to you for some reason. Maybe she's the crossing guard at school, or the lady at church that always gives you a hug, or even the neighbor lady that waves every time you return home. Write her a special card to deliver next time you see her. Decorate this one to the max!

<u>Teacher mom</u> – Think of a teacher at church or school or one that teaches you lessons, and make a poster for her that says, "Thank you for all you do!" You can tape together several sheets of paper or use a large poster board. Try to deliver this one in secret, so that she finds it by surprise!

Wasn't that fun? Doing good is always fun, giving to others is always better than receiving, and Mother's Day is just one day a year we get a chance to do this. There are so many other special days for other people, when we can do good again!

The Family Practice – Unraveled Plans - by Brandi Oman

I got on the treadmill at the gym today where I work. It has been over a year since I have attempted to use one.

In my mind, I had my morning planned. It would include: wake up early, go to the gym, get ready for work in the gym's locker room, have breakfast, and try to impress my new boss by showing up to work extra early on the first day. Typically, I plan my workouts for a couple of reasons. I like to people watch; and although I do not want to feel silly, I want to make sure I have an effective workout.

When I arrived to the gym, I drank my water, stretched my muscles a bit, did some useful breathing exercises and mentally prepared myself for the challenge ahead. I stepped on that belt, took in a deep breath, and pressed "Power On." I heard a loud clanking noise and then to my surprise the whole machine began to malfunction and totally go *transformers* on me. It hopped a bit, moved side to side and then accelerated in speed without me ever pressing the "Go Faster" button.

I squealed out loud and of course all the attention I had been avoiding was on me. My planning was very much unraveling at the seams. The guys that were around me who had just witnessed the horrible act of the demon machine contained their laughter as they rescued me and got the machine to power down. I, of course, laughed out of embarrassment and at myself for ever planning *anything* because plans never go my way.

So many times I plan and prepare, but life has a different idea. I had to change paths and come up with a different workout which felt like it was more effective than what I even had originally planned.

I believe God does this for us moms sometimes, as well. He offers us grace when we fail, he offers us help when we find ourselves in our own messes, and he gives guidance when our plans are not what were originally the best for us.

Isaiah 30:18

Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you,
and therefore he waits on high to have compassion on you,
for the Lord is a God of Justice; how blessed are all those who long for him.



UNDER THE INFLUENCE – The Contrast! – by Marcy Lytle

I was walking one morning, one of those mornings that was just perfect. The wind was low, the temps were cool but not cold, and I had chosen a trail I frequent after picking up my work for the day. It's just a sidewalk, really, around a big group of industrial buildings but I enjoy it, when I'm walking alone. There are trees along the sidewalk, a big field beside me, and I feel safe. I often just listen and talk to Him about life and all sorts of things...

Recently, I decided to snap a few photos of whatever I saw of interest as I walked, as I do sometimes. One scene particularly caught my eye, and that was of a tree in full glory with leaves and all, and one that still had nothing but a few short buds. Of course, the one that was full was gorgeous and the one that was still in winter mode was pitiful. The contrast caught my eye for several reasons.

As I age, I'm dealing with fears of losing my leaves and my blooms – so to speak. People of a certain age seem to fade into the background and then become a "burden" to their kids, in need of all sorts of help and attention. After losing our moms, my husband and I realized how difficult old age is, to navigate through the waters of losing faculties and abilities, while all around you there are still children being born and young people growing and lives that are thriving. It's such a contrast! And who wouldn't want to be on the thriving side of things?

I also thought of how we often compare ourselves at different times in our lives to our friends and those around us. We're in the middle of loss and starting over, when they're building another home and traveling the world. It seems they're alive in full color, and we've lost our leaves and are standing naked, wondering if we will ever bloom again.

Finally, I decided I was going to look up a few facts about plants and how they bloom, when they bloom, and why. It seems that it's rather scientific...not emotional at all...for plants! Plants have a sense about them that measures the amount of darkness around them, and how much cold they have experienced. Some flower only in short-day lengths – winter, and others only in long-day lengths – summer. And some plants are day-neutral! In other words, it's all about darkness vs. light!

Plants also know when change is coming. Trees start dropping their leaves way before the first frost because nights are getting longer, and they know winter is on its way. Did you know that when a certain number of chilling hours accumulate, this stimulates plants to sprout blooms? In other words, according to one garden columnist I read, plants have "the ability to sense the world around them and respond to it."

I didn't really need to read any more. That information alone was fascinating. God made these plants with the innate ability to respond to the weather so that they bloom when they're supposed to show up in all their beauty. I believe he did the same for us.

We can ask him for his Spirit to give us perception (and he will!) to observe the darkness and light, and to respond to the light! We can pray and receive discernment about change, and

learn to anticipate it rather than fear it. Every plant has its season of blooms that come around every year, as the plant responds to the changes in the temperatures around it. We too know that we will continue to bloom over and over again because of two reasons – we are connected to the Vine and we are promised eternal life.

Even though my body is aging, my spirit is just beginning. Even when I feel my leaves have fallen when everyone around me is putting on new ones, I know my time is coming. I'm just in a season at the moment of observing the world around me and leaning into the changes that are coming.

I'm pretty sure that one of these mornings when I come around that side of the trail and see that same little pitiful tree, it will be covered with blooms and stand out among the green trees around it...even though it's small. It's time to bloom is coming...and then the seasons, the light and the cold will settle in again...and again. That's what makes my walk so inviting and pleasant and new, every day that I choose to take it...in the light of day...or in the heat of the summer.

Strengthening Your Core - The Color Orange – by Marcy Lytle

One thing I enjoy doing when I take walks alone is to talk to God. I think I mentioned this in another article once, but when I talk to Him I enjoy sending accolades and praise using the letters of the alphabet. For example, just this morning I started with "You are awesome, big, caring, doting, everlasting, faithful, etc." You get the idea. It really positions my heart and mind to focus on the goodness of my Father.

I've done this exercise a few times and each time I feel his voice saying he wants to use those same letters to talk back to me, his daughter, telling me what it is he loves about me. When I was younger, I'm pretty sure I would have had a hard time hearing anything but condemnation and thinking it was all his voice. As I've grown older and learned more about his character, I realize his thoughts toward me are of love and not disdain. So if one of those condemning words enters my mind, I quickly dismiss it.

This particular day, I was happy to hear his voice repeat some of the same attributes back to me – like understanding, wise, and zealous. (I always skip the letter X!) This made me know that he sees me through his son Jesus, who makes me pure and whole because of His spirit at work in me.

However, I was quite surprised when I was walking and felt like He told me I was the color "orange" when He came to the letter O. No, I didn't hear an audible voice, I just went with the first words that came to my mind as I walked that were affirmative, and I received them as a nod from Him.

I thought about the color orange and decided I would look up more about it, as well as think on the color orange and ask God why he sees me as that color.

One of the answers I felt he gave was that just like the sunset is the last thing we all love to see as we close out our day, he enjoys hanging with me in the same way, and loves to see my face as each day ends and another one begins. This made me smile and feel so warm inside, because honestly I hadn't been sitting and listening to his voice much at all.

Here's what else I found out about the color orange:

It's made by mixing red and yellow, which I knew. But I loved that I was a mix of primary colors and not one of the primaries. I'm not sure why, but I liked that!

Orange is usually associated with amusement, warmth, energy and activity. I'd say I love all of those, and I'm happy He made me that way!

The color orange, of course, came from the ripe orange fruit. Oranges are not the kind of fruit you just bite into. They have to be peeled to get to the flavor. And the peel is a good slug repellent! I know that I have a thick skin that He has to gently peel back daily to reveal his goodness in me, and I'm so thankful to know that he does this gently and with good intent!

Orange contrasts beautifully against blue, especially dark blue – and that's my favorite color!

In psychology, orange is optimistic and uplifting. "Those inspired by orange are always on the go," according to *Color Meanings*, by Jacob Olsen. Now, that describes me totally! I love to go!

That article also says the color orange gives us the freedom to be ourselves. I needed to read that, because I still toy with the idea that I'm not so pleasing to God because I'm so odd...

Maybe you could try this conversation with God, offering up praise using the alphabet to him, and listening back to see what he says about you! Pick one particular letter and listen, and receive all the beauty of that one word he speaks to you. It might be Brave for B, or Holy for H, or even Kind for K. Sit and think and write down your thoughts, and cultivate that word to your heart and smile...

God loves us, and he loves when we give him our praise and attention, because he knows that we're listening for him to talk back to us as well. After all, we are his creation and he is our Creator. And that makes for a beautiful sunset and sunrise, on any day of the year!

Healthy Habits – A Full Tank – by Marcy Lytle

I'm pretty sure we've all done it. We've kept running and going and doing and working until we collapse into a heap, completely spent and empty. Either we end up sick with a cold or worse, or we just shut out the world for a bit until we can stand up again and move. Sometimes, because we've let our tanks run dry we harm those around us with our frustration at how empty we feel. Oftentimes, our tanks run dry because of life spiraling out of control. But more often than not, they run dry because we don't heed the indicators.

Using practical examples, let's look at those full tanks we all need to run smoothly with longevity:

Scuba divers know they need a team above the water to monitor and be present should oxygen be needed. And yet we sink into deep waters alone and push our friends away, when they're willing to help. When we know we're sinking, we need a boat load of friends nearby with ropes, extra tanks, and supplies of love.

Landscapers realize that lawn equipment will not operate without gas, so they make sure before they start out on a big yard that the tank is full. Sometimes, we'd rather just chance it and keep going, hoping we make it, rather than filling up before we start our day with truth from his Word. I've done that with my lawn and had to leave my grass uncut and run to the station. It's not fun, and I always wish I'd filled up first.

Driving a car requires attention to the indicators and sounds that warn us that our tank is near empty. We hope we can go that extra mile, only to realize our car is sputtering and about to dry, with no gas station is in sight. We too have indicators – a sharp tongue, a weary body, a dull mind – that warn us to fill up with rest and relaxation for renewal and refreshment.

In the holiday season, we know our drawers need to be stocked with batteries of all sizes for Christmas décor, gifts for the kids, electronics and gadgets. It's so sad to have a child open a gift he cannot play with, because our battery stash is empty – and all the stores are closed! When we are on full force, giving and operating and going and shining all day long every day – we have to have energy supply! And that comes with wisdom to know that we cannot operate on our own. We need His strength and His power always. He is the battery drawer!

Extra bulbs are a must for the house, or we will be caught without light at the most inopportune time! And if we don't have those extra bulbs, we have to jump in the car and shop. We can't constantly be a strong light for our homes, our communities and our families without burning out once in a while. He says we need to sit at his feet, lay down our burdens, and renew our minds – and in doing so – we can then shine again full force reflecting His glory. That rest is an extra bulb!

What other analogies can you come up with, regarding keeping your tank full, your supply closet stacked, or your lights burning? We can learn so much from everyday living about how those same disciplines and awareness and maintenance apply to our spiritual lives. Without energy supply, we all expend more than we take in, and we just end up on the side of the road hoping

someone drives by with a full gas can to send us on our way. No one likes being in that position.

I'm one of the worst at going and going like an energizer bunny. Sometimes, all I need to do to refill is to exit my house for a warm walk in the sunshine giving nothing but thanks for the day's blessings. Other days, I need to cast all my cares on him and trust that He hears my cries and answers my prayers. That fills my tank with faith. And there are other times when all I need to do is show up with a community of others whose tanks are low and sing, worship, and offer hugs to the family he's given us all to love...as we exit with full hearts for the coming week.

Look at your indicators today. Listen to the beeps. Notice the flickers. And check your drawers. Running a little low?

Life Right Now – Sit Down Next to Me – by Bethany Gomez

Written to each of you readers, as if you were sitting across the table enjoying a cup of coffee with me...while I catch you up on my life.

My grandma's funeral was harder than I thought it would be. It was a very special and beautiful mass held at her church. I will not forget it. They had this beautiful singer that had the voice of an angel. My mom and my two uncles got to share in their own words of what she meant to them. It broke my heart. I just kept thinking that she would've loved to be there with all of her family and friends all together. She absolutely loved her family. One of the very last memories I had with her was her insisting to see "the babies" meaning all her great grandbabies, since they couldn't come to visit her while she was in the hospital. Come to think of it, I know she loved seeing us all together from her seat up in Heaven. I miss her.

So you heard that I was training to run the Capitol 10K last month and that it got cancelled due to severe weather? I was so bummed, still a little bummed about it, but I still managed to run a 10K that day before the storm hit. I wasn't going to let all that training go to waste and I ran a personal best. Even though it wasn't the experience I was hoping for, it was still very memorable and kind of exhilarating outrunning a storm. I finished just as it began raining.

Work has been going great. I work with an amazing team and sweet students, but recently it has been a little crazy what with one student moving, another student that moved away back in December but then moved back, and a brand-new student starting in our class all right before the school year is almost over. Wow, I can't believe this school year is almost over.

At times I'm so ready for summer break and I want time to go by fast, but then I quickly remember what is going to happen over the summer break and I want to stop time or at least slow it down. I don't want to move out of my lovely home that I have shared with two of my best friends for over three years. It's not only because I am five minutes walking distance from my job (although, I'm not going to lie, that is part of it) but I don't want my roommate and best friend, Abby, to move away to Dallas after she gets married. Oh gosh, I am a bundle of mixed emotions right now. I'm so, so happy for her but so sad she is moving away. I'm just so thankful to God that she is not moving across states, just cities.

I feel like my life right now is on that part of the rollercoaster where it's click, clicking slowly up to the top of a steep, downward, speedy drop, where life whizzes on by at high speeds, with constant quick changes. I'm not a fan of the drop, the anticipation of the stomach-in-your-chest feeling, and it's not going to be easy moving out of our house and moving Abby to Dallas. But I know after that drop passes, parts of the "rollercoaster" can be fun, especially when I have people I love in the seat next to me and around me.

Sometimes I'm over being an adult. Sometimes I feel ready for whatever life has for me and whatever God has for me to do. Sometimes I'm over being single. Sometimes I don't mind being single. Sometimes I feel like everyone is moving on without me. Sometimes I feel like time is moving too fast and I feel like I'm forgetting to enjoy the here and now. Sometimes I'm excited about the future and what it holds, full of its never-ending possibilities. Sometimes I'm terrified of the future and all its ever changing ways, full of uncertainty.

But then there is God. I know He will never leave me. Ever since I began following Him, He never has. He is teaching me to take it one step at a time and give Him my worries and fears.

Just saying His name, Jesus, calms the raging storm of thoughts and feelings inside my head that aren't from Him. I love Jesus so much.

Did you know that I've been writing for an amazing online magazine for almost a year now? I know, it doesn't sound like a big deal, but for me it is a major accomplishment. I have never thought of myself as a writer, let alone a good one. And on top of that, I have perfectionist tendencies, I hardly ever think my writing is good enough and regretfully I'm a procrastinator; I wish I wasn't. I'm also very aware that this is not a good combination, especially when it comes to writing. It is only be the grace of God and the grace God has given to my editor that I have reached this milestone. There has been several times that I have felt like giving up, because I am ashamed that yet again I procrastinated and didn't start writing my article till the last minute for whatever reason, very rarely is it purposefully done, but yet I fail to meet the deadline. I love the verse in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 that says,

"But He said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

I couldn't be more delighted and grateful to be a apart of such a beautiful community of writers for this God-filled, life-giving, encouraging online magazine, so I am going to commit to trying to grow in my writing skills and ask God more and more what He wants me to write.

So what is going on in your life, friend?

May an expectation of good burst from your innermost being May each road you travel take you higher than your dreams May your smile brighten the way for someone today May love gather momentum and explode around you May songs of deliverance rise from your household May fresh rain shower you with green growing life May hope grow deeply in the soil of your fields May the smell of gingerbread fill your kitchen May you dance and twirl just because you can May you encounter His love like never before May your neighbors rejoice in your presence May abundant flowers grow in your gardens May your children rise up and say thanks May you feel angel wings encircling you May the you hear the sounds of heaven May your dreams expand and explode May your heart be overcome with bliss May your ground be smooth and level May you marvel at God's acceptance May the wind always be at your back May birds call out through your day May friends be always at your door May bells ring around your work May you feel the kiss of Jesus May generosity jump in your lap May joy bubble up and surprise you May you lift up your eyes to wonder May a child lead you in your journey May music and delight apprehend you right now May astounding great news come your way today!



In This Together - Nothing Elaborate - by Bekah Holland

Have you ever sat down to watch a movie? Maybe a mushy romantic story of girl meets boy, boy sweeps girl off her feet with his wit and unmatched charm, maybe there's a teensy, tiny hiccup, and then they ride off into the sunset, in a two-seater sports car, convertible of course (man, what I wouldn't give for a car with no room for a car seat), for their happily ever after?

Those movies are great. I'm a sucker for *The Notebook* (or really any Nicholas Sparks book/movie for that matter), *Sleepless in Seattle, Sweet Home Alabama* kind of movies. I'm pretty sure I've seen them all and then some, including favorites like *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Casablanca* thrown in for fun. But after I've watched them, I find myself wondering, "What the heck happened?" with my own story. Don't get me wrong, I love my story, but let's be real, not many of us have a Disney, knight on a white horse kind of story.

Our story is probably a little closer to something in between *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Groundhog Day*. Lots of busy. Lots of laundry (so much freaking laundry), and dishes and kids and laundry (seriously, it never ends). And my husband and I barely catch sight of each other. And if we don't become really intentional, this is our normal. As women, I think it can be easy to lose ourselves in this life we've either created or got wrapped up in. And just as easily, I think our marriages can get lost in the mix too.

Honestly, sometimes it's easier to stay busy. If I'm busy, I don't have to look at any issues that might have crept up in my relationship with my husband. If I stay busy, not only do I not have time to take care of me, but I don't have to make time to check with my partner and make sure his needs are being met...and that he remembers what I look like when I'm not running from thing to thing.

So, we have to pause.

I'm not going to lie. Pressing the pause button can be scary. I can get so used to the constant motion, that I start to feel like that's the only way to keep our heads above water. This is where that "intentional" thing comes into play. Both my husband and I have to stop, push all of the other distractions out of the way, and find a way to remember that we're on this adventure together.

I used to think that the only way to do this was to get dressed in non-wrinkled clothes that don't resemble yoga pants, go out to dinner at a restaurant without kids' menus available and we'd magically fall in love all over again. Yeah....that was super realistic. It rates up there with unicorns and pixie dust. For one, babysitters are expensive. Two, non-stretchy clothing is overrated. Three, do we really need more than that?

I found out after plenty of tears, unmet expectations and uncomfortable undergarments that all we need is time. Our most valuable commodity. Some of my favorite times connecting in my marriage have been when I picked up some fancy cheese and crackers from the grocery store and we hung out on the couch after tossing, I mean gently rocking, our cherub children to sleep. Nothing elaborate, nothing involving extra money, just us, sitting, laughing, eating.

One of my most vivid memories with this kind of "date" is our first New Year's Eve following the birth of our daughter. We were exhausted. We had no babysitter. We had no money. But what we did have was a desktop computer and a newly discovered website called YouTube. We laughed until we cried and we toasted the New Year with our sparkling grape juice in our pajamas with our baby girl sleeping in the next room. That laughter has healed a million little hurts. It brought us back to the joy of our journey.

It's not quite as pretty, or easy for that matter, as the picture Hollywood paints for us....there are no white horses, or convertible without car seats, and most of the time, the sun sets long before we get to settle down. But we make time to find each other. And that valuable time eases a thousand fears, pauses the chaos of our normal routine and reminds us that our story, with Christ at the center, is the best love story ever told.

Date Night Fun – Discovery! – by Marcy Lytle

Maybe you think you know your town like the back of your hand, but do you really? Have you discovered all there is in every neighborhood and a few miles out of town, as well? What about discovering something new about each other? Without adventure and discovery, we'd all still be sitting on the shore somewhere near the east coast, with all of America waiting to be explored!

Here are a few date night ideas for you and yours that involve a bit of discovery:

Discover the Small: We recently had a QT gas station open near us, and we enjoyed stopping for their food which we had heard good things about. What if you planned a trek across town and discovered all of the small places you never frequent, like gas station stores, mom/pop places, tiny boutiques and small coffee shops that aren't well known? Do it, make a notebook of your adventures, and write down a review of each place. Plan out at least five stops for this date night idea.

Discover the Earth and Sky: Plan date night in your own backyard and make it a night of discovery. Start before sundown so that you can see the earth beneath you. Plan a spot for new décor or plantings, and make it happen. Have your supplies ready – like a new pot, potting soil, a piece of art for the fence, and the plants to place in the dirt. Once the sun sets, sit together all cozied up on a bench or a couple of chairs and observe the night sky. Not the constellations, but the vastness of the darkness and the beauty of the moon. Or...head to the theater or find Apollo 11 for a discovery movie.

Discover the Channel: Do you have Discovery TV? If so, plan an evening of a few shows you've recorded to watch, with snacks to go with. If you don't have that channel, each of you discover a new show the week ahead and record it, then share it on date night. If you're watching a cop show, serve burgers and fries. If you're settled in for a thriller, serve popcorn with all sorts of toppings and blood oranges for a snack. If it's a romantic comedy, then order takeout to be delivered for the two of you and enjoy in pretty dishes – discover a new place to order from!

Discover Each Other: This date night will be at each of your favorite stores – picked ahead of time. When you enter your favorite store, let him pick out five things he thinks you'd like. Tell him what you like/dislike about those five things. Then go to his store, and you do the same. No hurt feelings, here – it's a night of discovery! Maybe make a purchase or two. Try something new! Head to a restaurant for appetizers and dessert, only, and discover something new on the menu you've never tried before! Be adventurous!

Discover the Country: Head out of town, it doesn't have to be far, and stop for discoveries along the way. Blaze a new path by going down roads you've never ventured out on before. This is the time of year for your first picnics, so pack up one with a new recipe you've discovered on line, one you've not tried before. Discover beauty in the drive, by stopping to snap photos of old buildings, wheels of hay, a cow standing in a pasture, or a bridge that appears out of nowhere.

Discovery dates are really the best. We can all get stuck in a rut of going out to dinner and a movie at the same three restaurants, and the same movie theater around the corner from where we live. Venture out, dig deep, set your sights up and down and all around. Record your discoveries and keep broadening your horizons...together.

After 30 Years – Heights and Bugs – by Marcy Lytle

I'm all for women's rights, equal pay, fair treatment, and everything that women deserve and more. However, I found myself recently wondering about something. I make my husband's lunches every morning early, pack them up, and send him on his way. I share those lunch recipes on Instagram, and I've wondered, "Do people think I live in the dark ages because I make my husband's lunch?" Does it make me less of a woman because I "serve" him in that way?

I think those thoughts come because of the commercials, the films, the news, etc. that's before us constantly where women are rising to the forefront...at the expense of making men look foolish and stupid. And to use the word "serve" anywhere in connection with marriage is probably taboo in all of America! And I totally get it! Women don't want to be seen as "less than" the men they love in any way, fashion, or form.

So back to marriage. It's all about serving each other in marriage. And it's not because I'm woman and he's man and there's some sort of hierarchy of importance between us. It's about this thing called love. Love serves. Period.

My husband is deathly afraid of heights. When our family vacationed in New York for the first time, there was an escalator that was at an insanely steep angle and we all thought he wasn't going to make it. He had his head bowed and he was sick to his stomach and was so relieved, when he stepped off at the top. (Of course, we all chuckled a little.) I know his fear, and I help him out when he's in scary spaces by steering him away from an edge or just not going there at all. We didn't climb a lighthouse on a recent trip because the stairs were too steep and narrow, and that was fine by me. I stayed down with him and we looked up instead of down.

I'm freaked out by bugs when they get in the house. If he's home and I see a gecko (hate those things – they hang around the front porch) or even a small spider, I opt for asking him to kill it. It's just not my thing, to kill bugs. Or to see open wounds. He knows I will faint if I see a person bleeding, so he will call our children if he's in need in that way! Last week, one of those spindly freakish bugs entered the house (mosquito eater?) and I was so proud that I smashed it dead that I left it on the wall as a trophy for a couple of days!

My point in the two illustrations above is that we both have learned to serve each other over the years, just because we love each other, not because he's a man and I'm a woman. And if either of us ever feels taken advantage of we speak up in a nice way (mostly) to let the other one know how we feel, and we talk about it.

I get up early, I enjoy cooking, and so I make our meals for lunch to pack up for each of us. And I post the pictures because I enjoy what I'm doing, not because it's my "job" or "duty" to perform for him each morning. He makes the bed daily, first thing, because he knows that I work at my desk in the bedroom and it bothers me if the bed is unmade. I like my "office" orderly and neat.

I'm sad that so many women have been abused and mistreated and stepped on and treated as servants in homes where love should be the rule, and not rules themselves. It sickens me that women have been taken advantage of in the work place and made to feel like an object rather

than a treasure or asset. That sort of mistreatment gives rise to women everywhere demanding to be noticed and loved for who they are – strong and beautiful – regardless of how they appear to a man's eye.

And I'm also sad that this fight for approval and validation has entered into marriages so much that one can't serve the other, for fear of being taken advantage of.

Serving doesn't mean being viewed as a servant with less pay and using servant stairs. When playing the game of volleyball, all players rotate in serving, hitting, setting and assisting. Serving is not seen as a duty in that game, but rather an opportunity to score one for the team! It's the same with a couple. When we have the opportunity to serve, we do it gladly. When it's time to rotate and it's his turn to serve, there he goes! And if either of us misses that opportunity, we've missed a chance for cheering and applause for our marriage.

I just made his lunch this morning and it was an epic fail. The falafel balls fell apart in the fryer and so he's getting a salad with falafel crumbs on top. I told him if it tastes bad, just to go to Whataburger – his favorite fast food joint.

Heights and bugs, making beds and lunches...what opportunities do you have to serve the one you love?



Best of the Mess – Wonder – by Ashley Zanella

A few weeks ago i was having a great morning with my two little boys. I had just put on my favorite YouTube worship station. My 10-month old was eating his breakfast and my almost 2-year old was playing with toys. There was this moment where I looked from one to the other and saw this expression on their faces that can only be described as wonderment. They looked so happy and in awe at some of the simplest of life's pleasures.

Later that morning on our way to church, I continued to have moments like that. From noticing all of the wildflowers blooming in the greater Austin area, to what I felt was super clarity around a subject I had been praying on for a long time. I had been praying specifically, asking God, "What is the next step for me? My husband? Our family?" It was in that moment that I felt God all around me. He gave me the clarity I had been seeking. I felt his leadership, presence and direction in a way I never had before. Later that morning in church, one of my friends stood up during worship to say, "God's presence is surrounding us today. Can you feel it?" And yes, yes I absolutely could.

I consider myself a new Christian; however, most of my childhood I felt very close to God. He gave me optimism, hope and such a wonder-filled perspective. But somewhere down the road, like many people and other Christians, I turned away from Him. I became a skeptical. I believed in good energy and bad energy but I had zero confidence in a higher power or being. How I grew and changed and evolved to be in a place where I seek out God first is a tale for another time, but I felt it was important to illustrate that even through seeking God over the past three years, I had never felt his presence as strongly as I did on that random Sunday morning.

As I mentioned, for months now my husband and I have been praying for clarity - clarity for careers and finances. Do I stay at home? Do I go back to work? Does he have a career change? And if we do start new careers, what will they be? How would they work together? Would we need childcare? I had been applying for many positions over the past six months or so, many of which I wasn't really qualified for, some of which I had an "in" for. None of these I really wanted in my heart, but I mostly just wanted the money that would come with them.

I didn't get any of those positions. In fact, I only ever got an interview for one of them. And it's funny, because even if I had talked myself into believing that I would love any of those jobs, there was an undeniable relief when I got that denial letter. Yes, it hurt to be rejected so many times, or to not hear anything at all. Going through this, we undoubtedly ask ourselves, "What's wrong with me?" "Do I not add value anymore?" All the same, I still knew that whatever God wanted is what would be. I continued to put it into His hands. I continued to pray and try to let go of that self-doubt.

Going back to that wonder-filled morning weeks ago, and that moment of immense clarity, I heard God's direction for me so clearly. It literally felt like a stage light was shining down and he told me, "This is for you. You are going to thrive." I not only felt peace, but I recalled a profession I had recommended to me time and time again in the past but I had been filled with doubt. I never honestly considered it. So it was so odd for this idea to pop into my head at that moment, because it really wasn't something I was actively considering or pursuing. Within days

of that moment of clarity, I became connected with someone that is killing it in my future industry and she wants to be my sponsor, to mentor me and see me succeed. She works for a company that puts God first, then family and then business - values that align so well with my own. My friends and family are more than thrilled for this new direction and have full confidence in me to be successful at it.

What is more, though, is that I have full confidence in this decision. I feel so confident that this is what God has helped guide me towards. There have been so many confirmations that this is right.

I am filled with wonder, just like the wonder I saw on my little boys' faces. Wonder, because God knew all along the timing and the direction I was heading. I didn't, but He did. And I'm so excited to continue leaning into God and what his plans are for us.

Firmly Planted - Distant Rumbles - by Dina Cavazos

April and May are two of the best months in the prayer garden. It's a visual feast of colors and textures, both intense and subtle. As my eyes move from the varied shades of evergreens to scattered pops of color, to colonies of alien-looking succulents, I'm drawn into the peace and timelessness of God and the natural world I prefer. Today it's cool and still except for the sounds of birds, water, and the distant rumble of traffic. The distant rumble of traffic! That isn't congruent with my peaceful restful garden, but yet it's true. The world is here and near.

I'm in the garden but the world is nigh. My soul rests but my heart won't lie.

The truth is I'm struggling with something right now. It's so deep that in tears and sobs I poured out my pain in a dream last night. I, and an innocent I love, am here, in this hurting place, because of circumstances beyond my control. I was in a good place—a garden so to speak—and now it feels like the desert. I never thought I would leave that place, I never thought certain things could change...but they did. You can relate because it's a problem common to man: imperfect, well-meaning people make unwise decisions that impact other people's lives. None of the options open to me now come close to bringing me back to "that place" and my choice will impact this innocent one.

How can I resolve this? Will I make the right decision? Will the long-term impact be good or bad?

I feel angry that I'm in this position, that my world crashed, that I'm dry and dying in a desert I didn't choose. I long for the secure past and fear an uncertain future. I can ignore the distant rumble of traffic, pretend it's not there...but it is, even while I'm basking in beauty. Wrestling through a jumbled mix of loss, fear, displacement and despair, my heart cries out for answers. The only sounds are the birds, water, and the distant rumble of traffic. The birds aren't worried a bit that a storm is coming, the water isn't worried that its source might run out, and there isn't a thing I can do to stop the traffic.

I so love my God who understands these fleshly feelings and listens quietly as they wash over me. They will pass as I choose to follow his way of forgiveness and trust. Nothing surprises him and he's Lord over the light and the darkness. He's aware of the situation, and there's purpose in everything that comes my way because I'm his child. I know this...do I really believe it? This is an opportunity to show that I do. This is a time for trusting in Christ, my Savior, my Rock, my Refuge. I can't resolve it and the answer isn't clear. I can't know the future. This is a time to pray the prayer of Thomas Merton (1915-1968):

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and that I think I am following your will does not mean I am actually doing so.

But I believe the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all I am doing. I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Be encouraged...our God is an awesome God.

Moving Forward – Redeeming – by Pam Charro

Deuteronomy 31:8

"The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you and He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

I like to think back to how I felt before I knew the Lord. As I grew older, I wanted to hold onto my dreams, but everything I tried seemed to only dig a deeper hole of destruction and despair. I wanted love and acceptance but all I knew how to do was make a mess of things. I knew I was meant to be beautiful, but I felt so covered in dirt, shame and ugliness.

I was a serious truth seeker, but I had no idea that the answer was Jesus. Other solutions may have felt more natural and attractive to me, but God made sure that by the time I encountered the Cross at the age of 24, I knew it was the only hope for my life. I love to look back on that time and just thank God that he rescued my soul from sin, hopelessness, and damnation.

But as amazing as that is, he doesn't stop there.

Not only am I redeemed from hell, but the process is still continuing throughout my Christian walk. I don't know what lies ahead, but he has already gone there and has been working on areas for years that I'm not even aware are broken. He has set me up for victory in upcoming battles that I have no idea I will face. He does this so that I will know who he is and what it means for my life. His love and power are always weaving throughout my journey so that, no matter how dark the valley of the shadow of death, I am never helpless or hopeless. He goes before me and his redemption is alive to straighten all that is crooked and heal all that is wounded. What started at my salvation will continue until I take my last breath here on earth.

He was for me when I was lost, and he continues to be for me every day.

He never stops redeeming.

Simple Truths - What Do You Believe? - by Erica Simmons

It is funny how the things you have believed all your life can be blown up with a simple conversation. I was having lunch with a dear friend who shared with me how her women's group is studying the Apostles Creed.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit. born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate. was crucified, died and was buried: He descended into hell: on the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty: from there He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church. the communion of Saints. the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body. and life everlasting.

My Christian upbringing is Methodist and we recited this creed every Sunday. There was a time I knew it by heart. It is an amazing creed, as it contains all the key points most Christians agree are important to our faith.

During our conversation, she mentioned that the first lesson that she taught focused on the first statement "I Believe in God..." As Christians, how many times do we say that? We see poll after poll that asks populations around the world, "Do you believe in God?" I listen to the statistics and feel encouraged that so many people continue to believe in a being higher than themselves. I know, with so many religions out there, that *god* represents more than the God of the Christian faith, but that is not what I want to focus on. Think about that question and what your answer would be. How important is the answer to that question for you and for your faith? Now I want you to answer the question she used in her lesson.

Do you BELIEVE God? The removing of one two-letter word takes this, not to a whole other level, but many other levels. It moves us from knowing that there is a God who exists, "I believe in God," to how we live every aspect of our lives with, "I believe God."

Let's think about the implications. For me, "I believe in God" does go beyond knowing that God exists. It has always also meant to me that I trust in Him and have faith in Him. "I believe God" just hit me. It was like not a light bulb moment, but a flood light moment. As she did in her lesson, I begin to examine how the difference in the two statements impacts my behavior. If someone had a movie of my life when I came up against the toughest situations, would they say from my behavior that I believed in God or would

they say I believed God. There is a subtle difference here that has forced me to examine myself and come to some conclusions about the way I approach my life walk.

I have always struggled with just reading the bible on any sort of a regular basis. I tell myself that I talk to God all the time and I do. I would be hard pressed to go a day without talking to Him about something, even if it is my back and forth chat about dedicating time daily set aside just for Him. But looking at "I believe God" takes that behavior and puts a new spin on it.

You see, in order to believe God I have to know what He has said. Coming up in church and participating in numerous bible and book studies, I have a wide range of knowledge about my God through the eyes and revelations of others. What has prevented me before was what I can only describe as the thin veil of resistance, of dread and mundane that turned off my excitement. Since hearing this question, I am realizing that feeling is gone, not there anymore. That is the best I can explain it.

It takes me to Jesus's experience in the wilderness when He was tempted. The enemy attacked and Jesus overcame every temptation using the word of God. When He spoke, the enemy was IMMEDIATELY defeated. That is how our life can be. How do I know that? That's right. It says so in His word.

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps. (1 Peter 2:21).

As a former math teacher, I think about the examples I gave my students introducing new concepts. The examples were to be used as a step by step to assist students in being able to solve problems on their own. Think about that. Christ was our example on how to deal with the "problems" of life. I expected my students to be as successful when it came to solving math problems by using those examples. It's the same concept with Christ.

The sacrifice and suffering Christ endured was not so be could believe IN the story of His life, but He did it to show us how to live our lives and how to defeat the enemy. This is not about being able to recite the story, but to reenact the story with our lives...to have the same results, to have the same victories, that He paid a great price to provide.

Real Stories - Balance - by Kamrin Wolfe

When I was first asked to write this article, I jumped at the chance. I was excited to write because I had many ideas that I desired to pen, but I couldn't seem to figure out which direction to go. I could share about my journey through miscarriage, or the joys of raising a family or learning how to trust God for provision when your husband loses his job, or even share about the exciting new chapter we are about to experience. Yet, the more I processed the more I couldn't seem to find the right words. And as the days went on, it seemed like things became busier, and there was never a quiet moment to put my thoughts on paper. Then one day, a day in which I was so overwhelmed and exhausted (which seems typical these days), it hit me. Why talk about one thing, when each moment over the past nine years of becoming a mom and learning all about mom life are all a part of who I am and who I have become today? They are all elements of my story, every mountain and every valley; a story that is still not complete, but one that continues to be written each day.

My story can be summed up into one word. It's a word that in all honesty I'd rather delete from my vocabulary because of the pressure I have allowed it to put on me. It is also a commonly used word, especially in the mom world. And if I had a dime for every time I got asked a question with this word in it, I would be rich. Any guesses?

Balance. B - A - L - A - N - C - E.

As a mom of three (all under the age of eight), a wife, a ministry director, an entrepreneur, a woman who now works part time from home, on top of all the other things on my schedule, balance is a word that is definitely in my head more often than not. I don't know how many times I get asked, "How do you balance it all?" I'm pretty sure I have been asked that at least four times this month alone. I get it - I'm crazy busy and to the outside world I seem to "have it all together." Don't get me wrong, it's flattering to be asked (as though I have some amazing routine), but the truth is I don't. I don't have it all balanced. In fact, it's more of a juggling act, a circus really; I even end up laughing at myself quite often (in between the tears). Yes, tears. Lots of them because being a mom is the most exhausting, and rewarding, journey I have ever been on.

When I first found out I was pregnant nine years ago, with the baby we ended up losing, I was so organized. I had it all planned out, the nursery, the lists of what I would need, even a "baby binder," and how my life would look as a mom. It was going to be just as I planned, all perfectly balanced. Definitely not what would come weeks later. The emotional exhaustion started then. My faith, my emotions, my lists, they were all out of

balance, and all I desired was just a healthy baby. Fast forward to now (and of course, as mentioned above), I have three beautiful amazing answers to prayer, but that hasn't been a cake walk. My oldest suffered from ear infections and eardrum ruptures until he was 6 years old and went through three surgeries. On top of him being sick all the time, we had our other two kids to raise, a youth ministry to run, and in the last year a major job change for my husband. During it all, I found myself also struggling with many fears for the first time. Let me tell you, fear is crippling and clouds your perspective.

And that's just scratching the surface. Raising tiny humans changes you physically, emotionally and for me - spiritually. No matter if you work full time, stay at home full time, or are somewhere in between, being a mom will change everything. You somehow are supposed to learn how to "be mom," yet also continue to be a wife, a daughter, a friend, maybe a co-worker or whatever other hats you might wear. Life doesn't just stop and there is no A+B=C (which for this mom who loves processes would have been so helpful). And so that word - BALANCE - soon became this goal in my life I needed to reach. Honestly, I don't think that as a mom, even as a woman, that I am alone in striving towards that goal. I have asked myself over the years,

How do I "balance" the loss of my pastor, major transitions in life, say good-bye to both of my grandmothers, walk next to my friends in their darkest of days, stand firm in my faith when my husband loses his job, work part-time, keep the house clean, throw birthday parties, go on playdates & to school functions, celebrate the holidays, have family time, go on vacations, do the laundry (because it's my least favorite thing LOL) and so on...all the ups and downs of life...and still manage to raise kids in the midst of it all?

Besides that, trying to teach my kids what I myself seem to be struggling with is not easy. I have little eyes watching everything I do and how I respond to everything in life. I must balance it, right? I must balance my emotions, make sure everything is proportioned out correctly each day, so that things are accomplished, my kids get the perfect amount of attention, and there must be some routine that works! Don't tell me I am the only one who has had these thoughts...

I strongly believe we as moms, and as women, spend way too much time trying to find that "perfect routine" that keeps us "perfectly on track." We make lists, we make lists for our lists, we make schedules and buy fancy planners, create Pinterest boards all about how organized we are going to be, and we watch others on social media to see how they "balance it all." Tired, yet? Don't get me wrong, I am a list person, I live on lists;

otherwise, I couldn't keep track of it all. I even made a daily routine that would allow me to complete all my daily tasks and finish all my big projects, too. But then I looked at this routine and realized that not only did I have to get up at 4:00 a.m. every day, but I was scheduling playing time with my kids. I knew I did not have children in order to just put them on a schedule like some task list. And yet here I was doing just that, because if I don't get everything done than I am not Super Mom.

What? How many of you feel that way at the end of the day? I have felt it; I have thought it.

We live in a culture, because I have watched it with others too, that subconsciously as women, and we as moms, feel like we must run the world. We feel like we must do it all and accomplish it all and that if we don't, we fail. We must be those super women. But what good is it to be super women, when we are exhausted all the time, when we are emotionally drained, when we are scheduling things like playing on the floor with our kids, when we're doing a 100 things at 10% instead of doing 10 things at a 100%, when we no longer enjoy the things that brought us joy in the first place, and instead they are all checks on a list.

I get it, and there is nothing wrong if it works for some to set alarms and alerts as a reminder to move the laundry (because it never ends), but if we are at a place where we are having to set alarms for every little thing so we don't miss a beat on our lists. I have to wonder if we are way too busy. Then I wonder if "BALANCE" is even attainable by the way we define it and try to accomplish it? Because the way I am doing it - it's not working. And there doesn't seem to be a perfect routine out there that suddenly makes all my plates level out. And yet, as I have watched my world become more and more unbalanced lately, I realized, or more like God spoke loud and clear, that there absolutely is a PERFECT solution to my chaos - HIM. I needed a perspective shift. I needed to STOP & take big picture look at my scale.

Imagine with me for a moment a scale with several plates hanging on it, and each plate represents an aspect of your life. Start by putting the basic everyday things on those plates like housework, children, work, hobbies, groups you lead, dreams...and now add the details. How are you feeling? What thoughts are crossing your mind as you do this exercise? Maybe if you move this here, if you take away that, if you make another list, if you just stay organized, then it will all balance out. What about the "comparison" plate that also hangs on your scale as a mom, or as a woman? That plate right there, if you're not careful, will end up guiding how you maneuver every other plate and then your entire scale will absolutely be off balance. Comparison is the thief of joy, and soon your plates will just be check-off lists with no real passion or purpose other than being better

and more "balanced" than the other moms next to you. NOW – take a big step back from your scale.

What do you see?

For me, I quickly saw that not only were my priorities off balance, but that this imbalance was affecting my emotions, my sleep, my ability to be the mom and woman that God called me to be. I had been so caught up in the details and this definition I had of what balance should look like, that I began to lose myself, my dreams, my focus, my joy.

BUT GOD,
AS HE HAS ALWAYS DONE,
HAS STARTED TO REDEFINE (IT'S KIND OF OUR THING),

MY DEFINITION OF "BALANCE."

Real lasting BALANCE is found when we focus on Christ 1st, allow Him to be center of that scale and our guide in all that we do. And we can't see the center, if we are stuck on the plates, trying to balance them ourselves. Sure, it may look balanced for a few days, maybe even a few years. But if we are not centered on Christ when the unexpected comes, when things we can't control pop up, we will soon find ourselves very off kilter and possibly even stuck, hitting the same wall over and over again. HE must be our focus. I don't just mean on our plate somewhere as another to-do-list item; I mean HE is the one that holds all the plates, the one we seek as we make our lists and our calendars, HE will help us order them.

After all, as my life verse reminds me daily...HIS ways are not ours & praise the Lord for that.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.

"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:8-9

Now, will lists and things to do go away? No. Will the laundry ever be totally done? I wish. Does this mean you can't go after your dreams, run a business or maybe even just be mom? Absolutely, not. God has given each one of you giftings, talents and dreams, but those must align with HIM. And when you remember to focus on HIM & make HIM the center, the tasks won't be stumbling blocks or barriers anymore; they won't control your life, and you just might find yourself enjoying doing the dishes (one can hope) or being able to finally pursue the dreams He gave you. There will be days your physical scale may look off, there will be days no house work gets done, but you will know when you have found balance because there will be a peace you can't describe and a hope that is your strength to keep going.

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:7

"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

2 Corinthians 4:17

Being superwoman, being a supermom, doesn't come from doing it all, it comes from investing in our children's lives, teaching them how to follow the Lord and making HIM the CENTER of our life scale and theirs, too. In order to do that we have to STOP, learn to say NO, and take a step back to see the bigger picture. That means taking our eyes off our to-do lists, that means stop trying to maneuver every plate and make sure we have it "balanced," and instead put time with the Lord back at the top of our priorities. Ask HIM what needs to be removed from our plates and what we should say yes and no to.

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matthew 6:33 Do I have this down? No, not at all, which is why I am writing this to all of you because I know many of you can relate, and it keeps me accountable. This is a daily readjustment. I, we, must make a conscious effort every day to check the scale. I know for myself if I don't learn how to do this then I will continue to be exhausted on all fronts. I can't do it all, and that's okay. And my life scale will not look like yours and yours shouldn't look like mine. Some of you are single moms or might as well be, because of your husband's job; some of you are just now starting on your journey of motherhood; some of you have teens, some both littles and bigs; some of you mom and work full time, some of you are dealing with loss or the reality of not being able to be a mom; some are empty nesters or grandmothers, and that doesn't even cover everyone! However, the fact is we are all women with all different stories, and each one of us can find balance. It's not through the perfect planner, routine or by comparing ourselves to someone else. The only textbook for "balancing it all" is the Word of God.

The Lord is renewing my perspective, redefining my definitions, teaching me what true balance should look like, and that it is attainable. I am learning to be a Mary first so that I can be a Martha when He calls (Luke 10:38-41).

And so, I challenge you to look at your scale. What are you focused on? Then read and apply the Word, pray, and keep your eyes fixed on Christ. Take some time daily to take your plates before the Lord. Find a friend who will give you sound wisdom, will walk beside you and pray with you. Ask Him for guidance, wisdom and peace, and to fill you with the JOY of the LORD...even in the little and the mundane and see how HIS word will change your definition of balance forever.

"...so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn bush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briers the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the LORD's renown,
for an everlasting sign,

that will **endure forever**." Isaiah 55:11-13

My story is still a work in progress, but it is HIM working on me.

So, "How do I balance it all," you ask?

With CHRIST at the center...

and a whole lot of coffee.



Mom Plans

Young mothers don't need to work out. They lift carriers, switch car seats, carry sleeping children, and move mountains of laundry. It seems that young mothers' arms must be the strongest of them all.

Mothers of teens could write books on self-esteem. Theirs has to be high, because teens are fickle and criticize, complain, walk away, talk back, appear unappreciative and know it all. One day Mom is a best friend; and the next day Mom is their worst enemy. These moms have to be strong in character!

Empty nest moms don't need a lesson in loneliness. They know it firsthand when they walk past those empty rooms and thumb through those scrapbooks, and hear the deafening silence when the chatter is gone. Moms of grown children are tough cookies, as they find themselves, reinvent their purpose, and discover their lives all over again.

Moms caring for their elderly moms and seeing them pass don't need to be told the value of life, that life is short, and to enjoy each moment. No matter the age of the mom that passed, the daughter is left with a hole in her heart that aches to be filled. She gives thanks for each sunrise and sunset and knows the value of enjoying the moments.

And yet...moms are struggling everywhere and searching and pining for love, worthiness, purpose and peace in this world that pulls on them at every angle.

Young mothers feel stressed if they can't make the gym, if that flat stomach doesn't return, or if all they smell instead of perfume is spoiled milk and poop. They look at other moms that look put together, and they feel weak.

Mothers of teens sigh and look in the mirror at those first gray hairs appearing and feel as though they've failed because he doesn't want to text when he needs to, and she no longer asks for advice except from her peers. She feels depressed and anxious and frustrated and fearful.

Empty nest moms start filling the rooms, traveling the world, or hovering over their newly married couples, grasping for something to help them feel wanted, familiar and full. They show up for plastic surgery or decide to have an affair, because they cannot take the fact that their kids are not there.

Moms caring for moms and dads start to panic, as middle age is now fading and their own solemn years are approaching. Questions fill their minds about what it will be like when they too are dependent on their own children, as they fight to be different and so independent...

Even to those who are barren and hoping, or pining and losing, he speaks to us from his heart of hope for the living.

It's a verse that we quote to graduates and young people, but we rarely read it again in the context of our lives as women. And many don't know what the verses above it say, but it's quite interesting...

From Jeremiah 29:5-6

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

We've done that, we're doing that, or we're hoping to do all of that...and then...comes that familiar verse.

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.

I love this! It's a promise not just for the young, but I read it as a promise to parents in whatever season of life they're in, and it's for all of us – the moms!

He knows the plans for us (and they don't stop at any age) and they're plans to prosper us (not to destroy or cause us to fade away) and the plans are full of hope and a future (not destitution and shame.)

Are you a mom of littles, tweens, teens, grown kids or now parenting your own mom? Are you still hoping to have children or have lost a child?

There are plans that have been drawn up by the Master Architect that include a house full of life, joy and laughter, regardless of when or how many children are present...and these plans are still being put together for all eternity. They don't end with old age and death.

Happy Mother's Day to the strongest women I know...even if you aren't aware of it just yet. And smile at the thought of how strong you are, how your house is standing firm on the Rock, and how your Father is in charge of every nail and every board upon which you stand. And marvel at his master plan.

FRESH THYME - KNEE BUDDY - by Marcy Lytle

I have a couple of friends that check on me often and ask how my prayer request needs are going. One always checks in to see how my elderly dad is faring, another asked often about my ear that had suffered trauma from airplane pressure, and still a couple more just ask how I'm doing. I also do the same for a few people, as I think of them. There's really nothing quite like having a prayer partner, a person that will go to their knees for you, time and time again. Let's call them knee buddies, because that sounds so awesome, doesn't it?

Sure, we can always keep our requests to ourselves and pray and trust, alone. And we don't have to ask others how they're doing or keep up with their needs. After all, we have plenty of needs on our prayer list! However, there's something very beneficial in having knee buddies and in being a knee buddy for someone else!

Here's the list for why having a prayer partner is awesome:

It relieves a load from your shoulders.

It allows you to rest your arms, knowing someone else is lifting you up.

It warms your heart.

It builds your faith.

It's pleasing to God.

Here's the list why being a knee buddy for someone else is awesome:

It takes the focus off of your own needs.

It blesses a friend's day when she's asked and then told that you're praying!

It renews your friend's faith in friendship.

It moves mountains.

It's pleasing to God.

I have a sweet friend whose father is struggling. All I did was text her to ask how he was doing. She stopped by later in the day just to give me a hug. But honestly, this friend is also a prayer buddy back to me. She checked on my status multiple times after my mom passed away.

I have another friend I rarely see, but we made a deal to pray for each other's kids years ago, and I know she still does. I do for her kids, as well. She often asks how I'm doing and checks in, and I try to do the same for her. It warms my heart, for sure.

One other friend I only chat with on Facebook. I know the struggles she's had in life, and they have been a lot! However, she is always supportive and praying for others with big faith! I'm

included in her list, and it makes my day when she says or asks or offers a kind word to me through a message. What a blessing!

If you don't have a prayer partner, or if you've never been one for someone else, try it. Reach out, expecting nothing in return. But then don't be surprised when He blesses you with a knee buddy out of the blue, asking about YOU.

FRESH THYME - May Flowers – by Marcy Lytle

"April showers bring May flowers."

I've heard that all of my life, but never really looked into where that saying originated from. After all, we have flowers in April where I live, and there are other places that don't get flowers until the winter chill is gone – hopefully in June!

The original saying supposedly went like this,

"March winds and April showers bring May flowers and June bugs." Now that's funny!

Apparently, the origin of the saying is obscure, with some saying it came from a poem, and others that it originated in the United Kingdom.

However, I would like to contend that the origin just might have come from the Bible! Here's a few verses that I think go with that saying and bring hope to all of us, of a field of wildflowers that make us gasp at their beauty, after a soggy damp season when nothing is present but gray skies and rain.

Acts 14:17

He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons;

he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

Isaiah 45:8

"You heavens above, rain down my righteousness; let the clouds shower it down.

Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness flourish with it;

I, the LORD, have created it.

Isaiah 55:10

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,

and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish,

so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

Joel 2:23

Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God,

for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful.

He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before.

Zechariah 10:1

Ask the LORD for rain in the springtime; it is the LORD who sends the thunderstorms.

He gives showers of rain to all people, and plants of the field to everyone.

Leviticus 26:4

I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit.

I hear so often that rains and storms are evil, and when we hear that, we see them as some sort of punishment. However, because of the way God set up the earth to receive showers, storms, and even floods, and then to flourish after all of the clouds have parted, makes me think he has this amazing plan of May flowers...after every April shower.

In other words, even if we are in the season of torrential downpours of the worst kind and all that we know and have and are is washing downstream...May is coming. If we know Him and belong to Him and love Him, our Father takes all of the muddiness of our lives and sprinkles amazing color into the wet ground and sends the sun. It may not appear today or tomorrow, but it WILL shine.

He promises up there in all of those verses that the ground WILL yield crops and bear fruit; that buds will flourish and appear, that the hungry will be fed, that he is faithful, and that even when it rains He is kind.

If you don't have a pot of flowers on your porch or in your garden, go get some. Look at them daily. Water them. And wonder at the beauty of the blooms after the grayness of the rain. After all, it's the month of May.

FRESH THYME - A Steady Hand – by Marcy Lytle

We love to walk. He likes trails with a bit more challenges, and I like trails that are straight and a bit more picturesque. We walk a little of both. Sometimes, I forget to wear shoes that are appropriate for walking on uneven or pebbled paths, and my feet hurt. Even when it's chilly outside, we bundle up and go. Now that it's starting to warm up, we will still go – because it feels SO GOOD after the walk is over!

Recently, we chose a trail that we had not been on before, and we didn't really know anything about it. The path at the entrance was granite and looked flat and nice, so we figured the entire path was the same. Thankfully, my husband decided to snap a picture of the map that was at the entrance, in case we needed to use it. The trail was not a loop, as many are that we walk, but rather one with lots of forks and turns.

Pretty soon, we came to these stairs made from rocks. They were pretty and easy enough to navigate. I had brought along an umbrella, because it looked like rain, but a few times I used it to steady myself it slipped! I didn't make that mistake again!

I had images and thoughts of "what if snakes are around," because after all, it's the beginning of the spring season when they start sneaking out and slithering by. A few times, my thoughts kept me from looking up at the beautiful greenery and flowers along the path.

Not too much further, we had to cross a stream. And then another, and another. I did NOT want to continue on this path, because I didn't know what might be up ahead, and we hadn't really passed any other people! Once before, we got stuck in a "forest" just before sunset and almost didn't make it out. I remembered that panicky feeling, well. And I did not, no way, want to be in this place after dark – with creeks to cross!

My husband is super patient and always offers me his hand, which I take firmly, as I step on rocks. He steps on them before me, to make sure they're steady and not slippery. I have no choice but to follow and trust him, and so I take his hand and we cross safely. Once across, he often says, "That was fun," while I reply, "I hope that was the last one."

Can you tell I'm not that adventurous?

Near the end of our trek, we came to a place where we did not know what to do. One direction was between two tight rocks and the other way was across another large stream and the path on the other side looked like a dead end! Remember, I said he took a photo of the map? He looked at it and realized we needed to go back from where we came and exit a different way. We actually ran into another walker that also pointed us in the right direction!

It wasn't long before we were out of the trees and back on the street, walking on a sidewalk to our car.

Jon was thrilled with the adventure and so glad for the obstacles and the way he had to use the map to lead us through. I was relieved and glad that it was over, although a little part of me also realized that I enjoyed the journey a tiny bit.

However, had he not offered me his hand over and over again, I would never have had the courage to cross those streams! I did not want to fall in!

My point with all of this story telling is that his steady hand helped me through a place that I would have never entered alone. And how silly it would be of me to refuse his hand or demand that we go back, when he promised I'd make it across. What if I would have left him and tried to exit alone? I also realized how futile my pointy umbrella was at keeping me upright, and how it was nothing at all like a hand with fingers to wrap my hand tightly in a hold that brought comfort and peace.

I am always learning things in the everyday journeys of life. One thing I'm still working on is to enjoy the path and all that it brings, instead of worrying and wondering and pondering and complaining about what might be around the corner, or how swift the stream might be.

FRESH THYME - The Flawed Shoe – by Marcy Lytle

There it was. Such a cute shoe and it fit perfectly. I had already imagined what I would wear with it, as I strolled through the rest of the store before entering the checkout lane. And the best part of all was that it was on sale! I always love a good comfy shoe (it has to be cute, too) that's affordably priced. Finding those three criteria together is a winner!

I pushed my cart up to the next available cashier and as I laid the sandals up on the counter, I gasped. The back loop where the strap was supposed to feed through on one of the sandals was torn loose. In fact, it was completely missing. I had only tried on the left shoe completely, and had just slipped my foot into the right shoe. As disappointed as I was, I knew I didn't want these shoes with that flaw, so I asked the lady to put them back.

As I exited the store, I breathed a silent, "Thank you," because I was relieved that I had not purchased those shoes and gotten home to discover that terrible flaw that made them completely unwearable. The shoe wouldn't have even stayed on my foot!

That scene stuck with me for a while, at how close I was to forking out my money for this beautiful shoe that I wouldn't even be able to wear because it was damaged goods.

I don't know why, but I thought of how many times He protects me like that from danger. I am unaware many times of things around me that might be unsafe or not the best of places to be, and I know he's with me to keep me from falling on my face or being disappointed with something I think looks good but isn't. He always knows best.

As kids, we have to somehow trust that our parents know best when they tell us no over and over again, when we continually place that toy or that candy up on the counter and beg to buy it. It looks so good, we KNOW it tastes great, or we just know that we must have it in order to be happy. But thankfully, we have wise parents that know that particular candy causes a stomachache or that toy isn't safe for our age, or any number of reasons that we can't have that which we think we need.

I don't know why it's so hard to trust HIM in that manner, but it is. I remember many times I've prayed for a certain outcome, even put my request in my cart and laid it before his feet asking for it now, only to be told to wait or not to receive that request at all. And sometimes, I've left his feet or presence wondering if he cared or if he even heard me.

I believe the longer we walk with Him and listen to his voice the more we will have eyes to notice flaws and danger and missing pieces in things that we at first think are must-haves. We won't demand so much to have this particular answer, but rather leave our carts empty for him to fill with those things that are good and whole and safe.

I'm thankful I didn't buy those shoes that day. I was sorry there was not another pair to buy instead, but apparently I didn't need them. Since then, I've found other shoes that are just as cute and make me smile.

His answer of no, or his gentle hand that shifts our focus to notice that which is not good for us, and his nudge for us to leave that request on the table for now are all because he loves us and he sees that which we don't see. He knows our hearts and what we need in order to be at peace and grow and be settled, not always in chaos and frustration.

The part we don't know is that if we just sigh and say, "Thank you," as we walk on about our day, He's already at work creating something fantastic that will satisfy more than that request we left behind.

It's hard to trust. It's disappointing to want and not receive. It's maddening to realize flaws when we thought there was perfection. But it's also life to realize the fall we could have taken had we gotten what we placed on the counter.