

An Inner  
Journey to  
**Easter**

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL



ANNE KATHRYN KILLINGER

An Inner  
Journey to  
Easter

*For John,  
who is the light of my life*

An Inner  
Journey to  
Easter

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

by

Anne Kathryn Killinger



Copyright © 2010 by Anne Killinger.

All rights reserved. For permission to reuse content, please contact Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA, 01923, (978) 750-8400, [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com).

Bible quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked NASB is taken from the *New American Standard Bible*®. © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

Cover art: FOTOSEARCH

Cover and interior design: Elizabeth Wright

Visit Chalice Press on the World Wide Web at  
[www.chalicepress.com](http://www.chalicepress.com)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

10 11 12 13 14 15

EPUB: 978-08272-16426 EPDF: 978-08272-16433

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Killinger, Anne Kathryn.

An inner journey to Easter : a Lenten devotional / by Anne Kathryn Killinger.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8272-1641-9 (hardcover)

1. Lent—Prayers and devotions. 2. Easter—Prayers and devotions. 3. Devotional calendars. I. Title.

BV85.K47 2010

242'.34—dc22

2010034922

Printed in the United States of America

# Contents

Foreword

Transition

Pain

Anxiety

Sadness

Fear

Confusion

Compulsiveness

Change

Release

Adventure

Achievement

Surrender

Pride

Risk

Rejection

Apology

Appreciation

Presence  
Silence  
Beauty  
Reassurance  
Contentment  
Kindness  
Elation  
Support  
Worth  
Gifts  
Gratitude  
Blessings  
Journey  
Friends  
Hugs  
Forgiveness  
Compassion  
Words  
Time  
Justice  
Independence



Faith  
Beginning

# Foreword

For a Christian, Easter is a very special time and should not be approached without thoughtful preparation. Most of us prepare for it in casual ways. We think especially of what we shall wear, whether it will be an old dress and shoes or new ones, a hat we've worn before or a lovely new one. We usually plan a special meal, perhaps with lamb because it has always been associated with the Lamb of God, and, if we aren't on a diet, some yeasty bread and a fattening desert. Sometimes we even take a special trip at Easter, to the seashore or the mountains or to see friends or family members we don't see very often.

If you are like me, though, you know we often fail to prepare in the most important way, so that our hearts are ready for the dramatic news that Christ is risen and a new order has come into being. Spiritually, Easter sort of sneaks up on us. We know it is coming, but we stay so busy doing the routine things which constitute our lives that we aren't very much aware of its approach until it is suddenly upon us, and we are like the poor girls in Jesus' parable whose lamps had gone out while they slept, so that they weren't ready to celebrate the coming of the bridegroom.

We have not kept vigil through the long days of Lent.

We have not walked with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem or watched and listened as he taught and ministered during

Holy Week.

We have not prayed with him in the garden of Gethsemane or followed him to the cross on Golgotha.

Then one Sunday morning, we wake up and realize that Easter is upon us. We feel empty, guilty, and unprepared for the blessing of a great celebration.

It doesn't take a lot of time to prepare for Easter. Actually, it only takes a few minutes a day. One of the ways I like to prepare is by reading something inspirational each day. I think it was Stephen Leacock, the humorist and essayist, who said he liked to take small bites of thought and chew them well. I find that it's amazing what a single idea or expression can mean to me when I lodge it in my heart and ponder it while going about my ordinary tasks and routines each day.

Most of the writings in this book—one for each day during Lent—are ideas I have pondered in such a way. They are small thoughts or observations. I have enjoyed turning them over and over in my mind and reflecting on their individual beauty, piquancy, or power.

I hope that reading and thinking about these selections will help you prepare for Easter the way writing about them has helped me. At the very least, I hope you and I will be friends when you have finished reading the book, for these are my very intimate thoughts and you will have spent several weeks with them. When we have made this inner journey, it will be my pleasure to wish you a happy

Easter and my hope that your entire year will be richer and more rewarding for our having traveled this way together.

Anne Kathryn Killinger

## *Transition*

I wish I were present ... and could change my tone.—  
*Galatians 4:20*

Spring arrived early this year. Rain has pelted the earth for six consecutive days. Our house is damp. The balmy temperature outside makes my skin feel clammy. Even my soul is moldy. What a way to begin Lent! If asked at this point what I'm giving up for the Lenten season, my quick, unreasoned response would be "rain."

With cabin fever and a watery soul, I decided to don some rain gear and brave the elements to take a three-mile hike. This daily walk is ordinarily reserved for when my husband comes home from work. We enjoy strolling up and down the roads and byways and chatting about the day's happenings. But today, facing the beginning of Lent, I needed to clip off the distance alone and try to find some redeeming feature to my being in this water-soaked world.

I haven't ever enjoyed walking in rain. As a child, I would be a "Miss Crossmouth" whenever I had to walk to school or church on rainy days. On this day, I had trudged about half a mile, with my head bent low, before I realized that

the rain had stopped. “This is more like it!” I thought. Then, a few minutes later, I felt warmth on my back that made me stop and turn around. There was the mythical sun, barely breaking through a sky full of dark, ominous clouds. But that lone sunray, shining brightly down on me, was like the breath of God giving me new life.

I resumed my walk with a light heart and a bouncy step. Joyously, I began to see everything around me: the fat, wiggly earthworms; the smallest leaves on the tallest branches of the stately oaks; and the bunnies hopping from one green clump of grass to another. Gratefully, I admired the clusters of pure white blossoms on the wild dogwood trees beautifully gracing wooded areas. The azaleas, tulips, and daffodils had been washed to the brightest reds, pinks, and yellows I had ever seen. I felt almost overcome by the sweet fragrance of the purple and white hyacinths brought out by the steady rains. The gentle wind seemed to whisper a delicate song of praise in my ears. It was as if everything in nature were preparing anew for a season in which to celebrate the passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord!

How will I celebrate Lent? I’m giving up a morose attitude and a dampened spirit. I’m taking a forty-day journey, hand in hand and tête-à-tête, with the Master. “The rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come” (Song 2:11b-12a).

Lent never began so beautifully!

*Prayer: Give me the gift of awareness, O God. Help me to be sensitive to the extraordinary beauty of the world in*

*which you have placed me and to live with your praise on my lips. Amen.*

## *Pain*

They led him away to crucify him.—*Matthew 27:31*

Pain is everywhere. It comes in different guises and degrees. Sometimes it is a mild interruption in a normal day; sometimes it is a constant companion. Pain is real. Very real!

Pain can be terribly frightening. It sends out alarms that can be difficult to turn off. Often it is a signal for help. A baby cries with an earache in the middle of the night. A child doubles over in agony with a ruptured appendix. A woman about to give birth emits a sharp, piercing noise.

Sometimes pain springs from a sense of lostness or from the hurt caused when loved ones are separated by war, death, or divorce. Some pain is excruciating. Think about the pain Mary must have experienced as she watched her firstborn son dying on the cross.

When our children were very small, we spent a month touring Spain. We visited many churches and museums, where we saw endless statues and paintings depicting the crucifixion. One day we noticed that our younger son, then only six, was intent on drawing a picture of Christ on the



cross. In one corner of the picture was a woman with great tears dropping from her face. I asked our son who the woman was.

“That’s Jesus’ mother,” he said. “She’s crying. It must have hurted her.”

The crucifixion “hurted” a lot of people, but it was necessary to change the world. It brought hope and meaning. It showed us that even pain and suffering can be a blessing.

I must remember this during Lent and stop thinking of all pain as bad. Maybe some of my pain is actually good, if I can only turn it into more useful or productive channels.

*Prayer: Thank you, God, for the great pain you have suffered to make our world a better place. Please help me to deal more thoughtfully and creatively with my own pain and to turn it into a blessing. Through Christ my Lord. Amen.*

## *Anxiety*

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.—  
*Matthew 6:25*

More than once in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Do not be anxious.” I have thought about those words for years. I have heard many sermons on them, read books and articles about them, and even given devotionals on them myself.

Unfortunately, I’m the kind of person who is anxious if she doesn’t have some anxieties clearly in mind. The very idea that I am not supposed to be anxious poses a real problem for me. My sister and brothers always said that our mother was never happy unless she was wringing her hands and worrying about something. Maybe that is why she so successfully raised a family of six overly anxious children.

I have discovered that anxiety comes in degrees. Maybe we can define the three categories as a gnat biting, a dog gnawing on one’s ankle, and a pack of voracious wolves attacking.

Small anxieties—the gnat bites—include worries about being punctual, choosing what to wear, getting the laundry done, unloading the dishwasher, doing the marketing, deciding if it is time to color one’s hair, and remembering to get gas in the station wagon before it runs out on the highway.

Medium-sized anxieties—the-dog-on-the-ankle kind—include such concerns as denting the fender, taking a trip to the dentist, having a library book that is already three weeks overdue, burning the pot roast thirty minutes before guests are due for dinner, and forgetting to make motel reservations before a holiday weekend trip.

The real biggies—those darned wolves!—are anxieties about serious illnesses, losing a job, getting ready for a move, crime in one’s neighborhood, drugs in the children’s school, international justice, loved ones on the battlefield, and world hunger and poverty.

The problem for anxiety-prone persons like me is that worrying about even the most trivial concerns can become a fatal way of life. The anxieties pile up like immense snowdrifts that block us from any hope of a peaceful, joyful existence. They govern our very being, turning us into martyrs, eroding our health, ruining our dispositions, and making us forget that the world is actually quite pleasant and beautiful.

My grandfather always insisted that somewhere a Bible verse says, “Fret not thy gizzard out.” I haven’t ever located that passage. Gizzard is not even listed in my

concordance. But even though it isn't quite as colorful as my grandfather's version, Paul's admonition comes pretty close: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).

I guess we're trying to be Mary, the sister who spent her time adoring Jesus, instead of being Martha, who fussed over all the household duties and then complained about Mary's neglecting to help her. If I spent more of my day thinking about God and what God wants, I'd have a lot less time to fret over the things I can't do or shouldn't do.

*Prayer: Overwhelm me with your presence, O God, so that I will not notice all the things that threaten my serenity and composure. Amen.*

## *Sadness*

Sorrow is better than laughter,  
for by sadness  
of countenance the heart is made glad.

—*Ecclesiastes 7:3*

Most of our days are so crammed with joy that we are irritated when clouds of darkness come along to rain on our parades. Yet we can't fully appreciate the experience of joy unless we have had to deal with sadness.

Sadness comes in many forms. Sometimes we feel it when we overhear a mother shouting at her child in a supermarket or see her slap the child in exasperation. Sometimes sadness grabs us when we witness an owner beating a dog and then see the dog lick the hand of the person who beat it. Sometimes sadness strikes us through an elderly person neglected by children, an AIDS victim shunned by parents, or a worker unjustly dismissed from a job.

Of all the images of sadness I know, the most overwhelming is the picture of Jesus and the way both Jews and Romans treated him. How unfairly people questioned

his actions, used him for their own advantage, slandered his character, and mercilessly beat and crucified him.

He was a lamb  
Born in a world of wolves,  
And the wolves began to snarl when he was born.  
What makes us hate the innocent?  
What makes us restless till its heart is torn?  
A little lamb,  
A gift from God,  
And they hated him for even being born.

—*John and Anne Killinger, "He Was a Lamb," 1976*

How sad that we learned so little from the experience of Jesus that people still treat others the same way today. I feel that all sadness is somehow related to the evil in the world and its relentless program to destroy happiness.

A precious promise in the book of Revelation assures us that the world to come will have no more sadness and no more tears. God will make atonement for all the hurt and injustice of this life and allow only love, kindness, and gentleness to prevail.

Meanwhile, though, we are stuck with sadness. It is part of what we have to think about during Lent. But we can thank God that sadness is now different from what it was before Jesus. Now we know there is something beyond it.

Now we can say with the apostle Paul that our suffering and pain are only momentary and inconsequential in

comparison with the salvation we envision through Christ (Phil. 3:8-9).

*Prayer: Whenever it rains, O Lord, teach me to look for your rainbow, for you have made all things different through Christ. Amen.*

## *Fear*

The fear of others lays a snare.—*Proverbs 29:25*

I read a devotional today that offered an interesting method of dealing with fear. It suggested placing the fear in upturned hands and showing it to God, then turning the hands over and allowing the fear to drop out, and finally turning the empty hands upward so that God can fill them with perfect love.

I have so many fears that my hands wouldn't hold all of them. All my life I have been crippled by fear. Every day I feel as if I am skating on thin ice that will surely break and plunge me into the cold, dark waters below. I am so habitually afraid that I can't conceive of ever breaking the habit. I live with my shoulders tensed, ready to ward off whatever comes. I seem to believe that if I am perpetually on guard I will manage to survive the worst life can throw at me.

- Fear of life
- Fear of death
- Fear of losing
- Fear of winning
- Fear of traveling



- Fear of staying home
- Fear of responsibility
- Fear of nothing to do
- Fear of loving
- Fear of not loving
- Fear of God

I should have begun with fear of God. Growing up, I learned at home and church about a God of fear and punishment. God would get me if I didn't do everything right, but I knew I couldn't do everything right. In fact, I was taught just the opposite—that I was a sinner, a klutz, a born loser. I could never please God by what I did. I was condemned from the outset.

Somehow I must reconceive my ideas about God. God is a God of love and forgiveness, of hope and celebration—at least for those who want to love God and do God's will. I must let God reprogram my brain so that it stops sending all those negative signals. I must trust God's signals and become convinced that God is really a God of love, and that perfect love really casts out fear.

Maybe I'll begin by holding out my hands with my fears in them. If I can't get them all in, I'll do it again ... and again ... and again. I have a feeling that this practice will make a big difference in how I face my day.

*Prayer: Help me to surrender my fears, O God, and let your measureless love fill all my being. Through Christ my Lord. Amen.*

## *Confusion*

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

—*1 Corinthians 14:33*

Today my life seems to be at an all-time low. My mind continually flits from one thing to another, trying desperately to make sense of my feelings and to discover the reason for the confusion I am experiencing. Could it be the cross-country move we recently made? Am I still suffering from empty-nest syndrome? Do I miss old friends? Am I still grieving for my mother, who died several years ago? Am I spending too much time alone?

The questions tumble on, and the answers elude me. They tease me by coming close and then darting away when I think I am about to grasp them. My whole being is tired from this frantic search for solutions. I sigh constantly. I seem to be hurting and grieving for the trapped person inside me who is so weighed down with pain and confusion.

What is wrong? I have so much, yet life seems so empty. Sometimes I manage a little laughter, but it is like a momentary flicker of candlelight easily extinguished by the

great waves of melancholy that roll over me. While I'm bodily present to those around me, I am busy taking note of all the exits. I feel abandoned by family and friends. I feel abandoned by God. I'm not even present to myself.

Who wants to be around anyone who is so hopelessly lost and confused? What will it take to put my life in order again? I do want to get my priorities straight so I can awaken each day and say, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps. 118:24). I want my heart to overflow again, the way it once did, and to be able to say, "God is in heaven, all's right with the world"—and with this poor, confused being of mine.

*Prayer: Take my hand, O God, and lead me out of this frightening place where I reside. Teach me to wait upon your Spirit and to follow when you direct me. Through Christ my Lord. Amen.*

## *Compulsiveness*

For I do not do the good I want.—*Romans 7:19a*

Many times have I heard the words “Think before you act!” Almost as many times, the words have gone unheeded. Most of my family and friends know me as one who leaps ahead of anything slow moving. I just must get right to the center of whatever is going on. I often act compulsively without waiting to weigh the consequences.

Whenever anyone calls in distress, for example, my built-in computer immediately begins lining up a wealth of solutions to the problem. Without even hearing the end of the story, I want to rush in with brilliant advice. I chatter away compulsively, as if the mere quantity of wisdom I proffer will effect an instant cure. Within minutes, I know I must have my poor caller hyperventilating and wishing she had not mentioned a word about her situation.

I also have a bad habit of finishing other people’s sentences. I am so sure about what they are going to say next that I can’t resist the urge to seize the ball in midair and proceed to the nearest goal line, leaving the

bewildered persons wondering what to say as a follow-up, lest I seize upon that and carry it away too.

Maybe these are not serious sins of compulsion, but they must surely be irritating to others. How much more thoughtful it would be if I only asked questions of the troubled person on the phone and gently led her to the conclusions about her situation that undoubtedly lie within her own grasp. How much more courteous it would be if I didn't interrupt other people's trains of thought by hijacking them en route to their destinations. My compulsive behavior must surely signal a sense of superiority in interpersonal relationships. I don't mean to send that message, but I probably do all too often.

Compulsive people have an enormous amount of energy. We spring forth without much effort. It doesn't even take much to trigger the spring. Instead of devoting that energy to what appears to be the complete takeover of others' lives and situations, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could use it to be thoughtful and supportive of them?

Suppose we applied it to creative acts of listening—really listening—and to simply being there when others need us. Suppose we used it to exude understanding and caring when others are troubled or distressed. Suppose we employed it to shore up their fallen defenses, encourage them when they are despondent about their own efforts, and remind them of how great they have been and how well they have managed on other occasions. Instead of supplying the answers for them, we would simply raise

their self-esteem so that they could draw more easily on their own abundant resources.

I am trying to remember this little motto: "Give yourself quietly to others so that instead of marveling at your strength they discover their own." I think Jesus would have liked this saying. It was he who said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Matt. 11:29).

*Prayer: Lord, save me from thinking I have to salvage every situation by myself, and help me to be a quiet support to those who need me, offering a shoulder to cry on and a word of encouragement instead of an escalator to the top of the mountain! Amen.*

# *Change*

He changes times and seasons.—*Daniel 2:21*

The world is changing every day; things are never quite what they were. Cities change, neighborhoods change, seasons change, families change, churches change, and friends change. Everything changes.

I basically don't like change.

I love visiting towns and cities around the world. I especially like strolling down lanes where history was made, visiting little museums, exploring old churchyards with weathered gravestones, and discovering little restaurants where the cuisine and ambience are unforgettable.

It bothers me to return to these places later and find that they have changed—to see buildings marred by graffiti or torn down to make way for new structures, to find quiet streets altered to make way for a McDonald's or a Kentucky Fried Chicken, or to discover that a church has been boarded up for lack of funds to maintain it. I want things to stay the way they are in my memories. I don't want to have to deal with a lot of alterations to the way the world was.

Several years ago, my husband made a professional change that required our moving from one part of the country to another. It meant a new house, new furniture, new friends, new shopping patterns, a new schedule, and a new way of life. About the time of our move, one of our sons married, which meant even more changes—a new daughter-in-law, new ways of relating, new arrangements for visiting.

Some days I think my physical being is simply not geared to any more changes. There seem to be so many!

Yet I love the changing of the seasons. Nothing thrills me more than crunching through dry leaves in the fall, watching a thick snowfall in the winter, smelling the freshness of spring, or feeling the stickiness of a summer day just before a thunderstorm. I can't imagine life without changes like these.

Sometimes I think, too, about the past changes in our lives. I've enjoyed all the places where we've lived. We have truly celebrated life in each place. I've loved the people we've known everywhere. What would I have done without them?

Why do I say now that I don't like change? Maybe it's because I never like to give up what has been but always want to keep things just the way they are. I feel a bond to all the places I have been and to all the people I have known. When any of them change, I panic. The change threatens my life as I have known and loved.



Yet I know that change is good. I think about the change that occurred when Jesus came into the world. Nothing has ever been the same since then. Would I wish that away? Not at all. I have to admit that change is an important aspect of existence.

God doesn't change. God remains the same from one generation to the next. There is something comforting about that.

But everything else changes.

Change allows growth of the spirit, expansion of the mind, and flexibility of the heart. I simply have to understand that and be prepared for change. Then perhaps I shall see it positively as a condition for discovery and joy. I myself shall change and then change will not be so bad. Who knows? I might even learn to rejoice in it.

*Prayer: O God who never changes, help me, who is always changing, to find so much comfort in your stability that I won't be upset at finding everything else in flux. For Christ's sake. Amen.*

## *Release*

“You will be made free.”—*John 8:33*

To release things—just to let them go or to resign control over them—is difficult for me. I have a hard time releasing tension, stress, fear, or anger. My nature is to be in charge, to manage everyone and everything around me. Letting go of that control is very difficult. Letting go means that many situations in my life will be unresolved and unfinished, maybe even never set right.

Letting go means I will never have the good relationship with some people that I want—people who have steadfastly refused to get along, people who have willfully misunderstood, and people I just wasn't on the same wavelength with. If I release them, we'll probably never be friends again, at least not with the depth and intimacy I desire.

Letting go means I'll have to stop struggling so hard with the church, which I dearly love but which gives me so much agony because it isn't the church I want it to be or that I think Christ wants it to be. It's hard for me to let the church go on as it is and not live combatively with it, trying

to remake it into my image of an ideal church. I have spent most of my life in a lover's quarrel with it, and it's hard to stop now.

I'm not sure I can let go. Letting go is probably the hardest thing I've ever tried to do. But what rewards it promises! If I release my tension, I will have more time and energy for meditation and the inner life. If I let go of my fear, I will be able to discover more of the grace and beauty in the world around me. If I surrender my need to redirect the thinking of my friends, I will have more love to give them. If I stop trying to remake the church, I will have more of a sense of worship and peace with God.

Jesus once told his disciples that if the people in a village refused to receive the word of the kingdom, they should merely shake the dust off their feet and go on to the next village. I remember a friend of ours saying that shaking the dust off our feet should have become a sacrament, like baptism and the Lord's Supper, so we would remember to do it. I'd like to try it now, during Lent, and see what effect it would have on my life. I have a feeling it might be a wonderful thing to do!

*Prayer: Help me to remember, dear Lord, that I'm not in charge of the world, You are, and that I should get on with my life as simply and joyously as I can. Amen.*

## *Adventure*

And Abram journeyed on.—*Genesis 12:9a*

Several years ago I saw a play in which two young men were going into the city for adventure. Whenever anything unusual occurred after their arrival, the younger one of them always innocently asked his friend, “Is this an adventure? Are we having an adventure now?”

Adventures are exciting and stimulating. They help us to relate to the greater life around us. It is by going into the world and having adventures that we become a part of it.

Recently I read a newspaper article about a man who is over a hundred years old and is still attending college. He has earned many degrees in his lifetime and has even been a college teacher himself, but his thirst for knowledge has never diminished. He reads three or four books at a time and says he feels that a new adventure is waiting for him in each of them. He lives with an insatiable thirst for discovery and understanding.

What happens to our understanding of people and the world around us when we aren't open to adventure? Our spirits so easily become stagnant when we cease to move

outward, when we are content merely with the trips we have made in the past, when we stop trying to grow, when we cease to make friends beyond the little circle we have always known. Once we decide we have seen enough, learned enough, and experienced enough, the parameters of our lives begin to shrink; and soon all of life becomes a repeat performance for us.

It is easy enough to smile blissfully and dream of what was; but that is to arrest life where it was and miss all the great adventures God has in store for us ahead of where we have been. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6). The way doesn't stop; it keeps going. Only as we continue in the way do we arrive at the truth and the life.

Going on is risky, of course. It is safer to stay where we are and be content with what we know. But maybe it is part of the subtle beauty of life that taking risks almost always opens up new vistas and worlds we have never seen. Who knows? If we could take enough risks and see far enough, perhaps we could see everything the way God sees it!

*Prayer: Lord, please help all of your children to have the sense of adventure that led Abraham to leave home when you called him to enter the wilderness, where you had wonderful things planned for him. Don't let us miss any of it! Amen.*

## *Achievement*

This ... must be fulfilled in me.—*Luke 21:37c (NIV)*

From an early age, we are taught to be achievers. Parents urge us to do well in school and excel in athletics. Teachers expect us to reach our full potential as students and citizens. Peers admire us for doing well. The whole society tends to reward us for superior accomplishments. Even limited achievements are recognized. A two-year-old is applauded for tying her shoelaces. A Down's child is congratulated for participating in the Special Olympics. A ninety-year-old man is praised for qualifying for his driver's license again.

The accent on achievement, however, can be costly. I have seen ten-year-olds burned out by all the programs their zealous parents have urged on them. Their after-school schedules are sometimes horrendous—piano lessons on Monday, horseback riding on Tuesday, dancing class on Wednesday, swimming on Thursday, soccer on Friday, crafts on Saturday, and tennis lessons on Sunday. They have no time to play and wonder and live like children.

Most of us adults impose the same kind of pressure on ourselves. We carry over from childhood the desire to excel, achieve, and be the very best we can be. We give 110 percent at our jobs, 110 percent at marriage and parenting, and 110 percent at buying and maintaining the finest homes money can buy.

Some of history's great achievements are enviable, of course. How exciting it would be to paint like the great impressionists, write poetry in the style of Wordsworth, compose sonatas with Bach's expertise, give concerts with the grace of Rubenstein, deliver an address with the power of William Jennings Bryan, or perform surgery with the skill of Michael DeBakey. Most of us, for all our hard work, will never reach such heights. Although we are programmed all our lives to succeed, we will never become famous for our achievements.

What can we do? Is there any consolation for us?

First, we can become great appreciators. At any ball game, the spectators are as important as the participants. If they weren't there to see the game and cheer for their teams, the sport would be greatly diminished. The same is true in life generally. People who stand on the sideline and root for the competitors are as important in the overall scheme of things as the achievers themselves. Maybe we need to be taught this as children, while we are learning the value of achieving, so that all our lives we can be developing the art of appreciation.

Second, we can take “the long look” in life, viewing things from the perspective of eternity. This approach has a way of radically altering the meaning of achievements. Jesus told the story of a very wealthy man—and we assume, by the same token, a very important one. When he died, God judged him as having been less successful than the poor beggar who lay at his gate, for the beggar was a person of faith.

Isn't it just possible that the only acclaim that really matters or has ultimate importance is the nod of approval from our Creator for what we have achieved from birth to death? “Well done, good and faithful steward” (Mt. 25:21 AT). Maybe this is what led the apostle to say, after a life of spectacular achievements, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13b-14).

*Prayer: I'd like to achieve a lot in life, O God. But when I consider what it means to be caught up in your love and joy, all the other things I wish for become pale and worthless by comparison. Amen.*



## *Surrender*

God is our refuge and strength  
a very present help in trouble.

—*Psalm 46:1*

My mother once said, “You can say anything you want to about Anne, but don’t say a word against her husband or her children.” These words rang true then and have remained unchanged these many years after her death. Somehow, in my eyes, my husband and sons have always been special people who should be protected from the world’s viciousness and cruelty. For some reason, even with my very limited capacity to protect them, I elected myself as their chief defender and have loyally fulfilled this self-appointment through the years.

I have fought, fumed, written letters, and wrathfully confronted people in behalf of justice for the three people who mean the most to me in this world. I am determined that these wonderful, God-fearing, and God-loving men shall be treated fairly and kindly by everyone around them. I am devoted to this role of protector of my family.

Or, at least, I thought I was until I learned something at a recent dinner party.

After the meal, we were seated comfortably in the living room with our friends. The wives were discussing the pros and cons of our husbands' vocations and places of employment. I voiced some dissatisfaction with some things about my husband's situation that I thought should be set right. Several other wives offered similar complaints about their husbands' situations. Eventually, the conversation moved on to other topics.

As our guests were leaving, one man said he wished his wife wouldn't always assume the mother's role of trying to protect him when things weren't going as well as they should. My husband, I thought, agreed a bit too eagerly. He also sometimes wished, he said, that I didn't always get on my high horse about his causes.

I had a hard time going to sleep that night. I was struggling with my need to keep the evil from my husband's and sons' doors. I realized that they have to fight their own battles and take the responsibility for their own conflicts. What was I to do? For years, they have been at the very center of my life, and I have a fierce instinct to want to protect them.

Finally, a sense of calm settled over me, and I uttered, "Thank you, God, for this insight."

What I realized was that my three men must act freely and individually. My role is to support them with a listening ear, loving arms, and prayers to God, whose ever-abundant

strength is always theirs for solving their own problems. As much as I want to act in their behalf, there comes a time when a wife and mother can no longer do so. Like Hannah, the mother of Samuel, I must give my three men over to God, the real Protector, who will look after them far better than I can. I will surrender them to God, and then give thanks for everything.

*Prayer: You are our real shield and defender, O God. Help me to leave my loved ones in your hands and give thanks for your loving faithfulness. Amen.*

## *Pride*

The earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy work.

—*Psalm 104:13b*

According to the Bible, “Pride goes before destruction” (Prov. 16:18) My mother used to say, “Come down to low doh, and don’t be hifalutin.”

I have always had a lot of trouble with pride and experienced a lot of confusion about it. When I was growing up, pride was portrayed to me as something negative that ought to be avoided. The church hissed words of damnation on those who were proud. My mother accused me of having dreams and ideas above my station.

I began taking piano lessons when I was five. For years, music was my life, my soul, my breath. I practiced for hours on end, striving to please my teacher. Mother said she had to drive me away from the piano bench, not toward it like ordinary children. I was enraptured by playing, by giving life to notes on the page, by allowing them to soar with beauty and majesty. I was proud of my playing. More specifically, I had pride in it. I wanted it to be the best I could do. I wasn’t satisfied with an inferior performance. I

felt compelled to do justice to the beautiful scores of the great composers.

Was my pride wrong? I didn't think so then, and I still don't think so. There is pride and there is pride. My pride isn't personal or self-glorifying. It is pride in trying hard, in giving my best, in refusing to turn in substandard performances, in renouncing slothfulness, in being true to the gifts of God. It means caring, loving, producing, sharing, and giving glory to God. My pride fulfills the biblical injunction, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might" (Eccl. 9:10a).

The world needs more of this kind of pride. I need more of it myself.

I read once that Johann Sebastian Bach, when he had finished a piece of music, often wrote the initials "S.D.G." in the upper right-hand corner of his composition. They stood for *solī deo gloria*—"to God alone be the glory." I think he had the attitude I want to have: that I will do my very best at whatever I undertake, and then deflect any glory it earns to God.

*Prayer: You alone, O God, are worthy of praise. But help me to honor your worthiness by doing my best at whatever I do. For your Son's sake. Amen.*

## *Risk*

I will follow you wherever you go.—*Matthew 8:19b*

Life can be a dull and lonely business when we don't take risks. It's like hiding in a tunnel where we are safe but never tasting, seeing, hearing, feeling, or touching much of anything again.

What if Albert Schweitzer had never left his comfortable medical practice to go as a medical missionary to a primitive part of Africa?

What if Mother Teresa had kept within the safe compounds of her convent and only prayed for the lepers of India?

What if George Frideric Handel hadn't given up his law studies to be a church organist and gone on to compose many great works such as *The Messiah*?

What if Michelangelo had been content to write poetry and hadn't gone forward to become one of the greatest artists of all time?

What if Mary and Joseph had not fled to Egypt to save their infant son?

What if the early Christians, knowing the fate that would befall them if they were discovered by the authorities, hadn't persisted in their devotion to Christ and preaching the gospel?

What if you and I play it safe and don't ever get involved with homeless people or people with AIDS or people of other racial backgrounds?

Taking risks can be dangerous and disquieting, but it can also produce the most meaningful experiences of our lives. It can lead to a cross, as it did in Jesus' case, but it can also lead to resurrection!

*Prayer: Forgive me, Lord, for all the times I have remained silent or stolen away to save myself from the consequences of being outspoken or taking the part of someone who needed my support. Help me to have iron in my soul, that I may be more deserving of your love and acceptance. Amen.*

## *Rejection*

He was despised and rejected by others.

—*Isaiah 53:3*

While I was browsing in an elegant furniture and gift shop, I overheard a man asking two clerks if they had any bedsteads. They didn't understand what he was asking for and told him about the antique oak and pine beds they had in stock and some others they could custom order for him. He kept saying, "No, I just want to look at some bedsteads."

Finally, someone explained to the clerks that he wanted to see headboards. Their eyes opened widely, and they said they didn't stock those separately. Then one of the clerks dismissed him curtly with an added admonition to "Go outside to smoke that cigarette." She didn't say "please" or "I'm sorry." Just "Go outside to smoke that cigarette."

The man's shoulders slumped as he turned to leave. He had not reached the door when the clerks and some customers standing near the checkout counter laughed at his simple way of talking. One clerk even made fun of the bibbed overalls he was wearing. Obviously he was not



accustomed to being treated this way. He just walked away, looking tired and bewildered.

The rejection that man experienced conjured up several thoughts in my mind. I reflected on the effects of shame, guilt, lostness, anger, helplessness, fear, and diminished self-esteem people often feel. Rejection can produce all kinds of negative outcomes. It can lead to loneliness, estrangement, or divorce. It can cause people to quit their jobs or commit crimes. It can even result in suicide. I can't help thinking it is one of the worst things one human being can do to another.

When my husband and I are in England, we often go to the china reject shops and sometimes to the Worcester porcelain factory, which has an enormous warehouse filled with rejected dishes. The dishes and cookware in these places usually have flaws in them, often so tiny that customers have to search hard to find them. They are marked down to very affordable prices. Through the years, we have completed whole sets of these dishes, bringing a few home at a time. Our friends think they are wonderful, but we know they have been rejected.

I wish the clerks who rejected that simple man in overalls could see the beauty in everything the way God does. If they could, they would never treat another human being that way again. They would realize that little flaws or differences make things even more beautiful and valuable—even in themselves.

*Prayer: Thank you, God, for not rejecting me because of my imperfections. Amen.*

## *Apology*

And they were greatly distressed.—*Matthew 17:23*

“I’m sorry.”

“Please forgive me.”

“Oh, I hope you will excuse me.”

My friend constantly utters these little apologies. Her speech is peppered with them. She seems to feel that she is the sole originator of all the errors in the world. If the Queen of England’s four o’clock tea is cool, my friend believes she caused it. It’s almost as if she thinks she has to apologize for her very existence. Sometimes I fear she will say “excuse me” once too often and somebody will say to her, “I’m sorry, but there is simply no excuse for you.”

People can offer the most ridiculous excuses and apologies. Consider the ones they give for being late:

“My dog was mad at me and wouldn’t let me in my car.”

“My child was playing with the clock and reset it to the wrong time.”

“You won’t believe it, but a horse stepped on my foot!”

How about the excuses sales clerks give:

“I’m sorry, madam, but that particular frock only comes in petite and extra large.”

“If you would care for one in two-inch yellow-and-purple polka-dots, I am sure we can find one in your size.”

“If we don’t have it in this store, we can get it for you in twelve weeks from our other store across town.”

Of course, auto mechanics dazzle you with all their great explanations:

“We’ve run into a little problem on your car, madam. The whatzamajig has jammed itself against the whirlapin, causing a reaction in the whiffelsnort, so we’ve had to send for a whole new unit that won’t be here until ten days from Tuesday. It will cost a little more this way, but you wouldn’t want to drive it without a new whiffelsnort. We’ll phone you when it’s ready. Or, better yet, why don’t you give us a call about this time next month if you haven’t heard from us?”

What I long for in the apologies I hear is genuineness. I want to believe that people really mean what they are saying, that it sincerely grieves them to hurt my feelings or run into my car or be out of my favorite ice cream at the grocery store or cause me inconvenience by not having a part I need for my refrigerator. I would like to think that

they are sorry enough to make some changes in their behavior in the future, to be more caring and thoughtful and helpful to others.

Then I think about my own apologies, especially those I make to God. Do I really feel repentant about the things I've done wrong? Do I truly intend to make every effort to rectify my behavior and thought patterns in the future?

Oh, my!

*Prayer: I'm sorry, God, if I have said things to you I didn't mean. Oops, there I go again! I hope I'm sorry, I really do. I don't want you to feel about me the way I feel about those other people who offer me their cheap apologies. Amen.*

## *Appreciation*

Love one another with mutual affection.

—*Romans 12:10*

Several years ago, my sister's husband was in the intensive care ward of a hospital, hovering between life and death. Only his wife and children were permitted to visit him. It was a stressful time. If he died, he would be the first of the siblings or siblings' mates to leave us.

As I thought about him, I had a hard time remembering when he wasn't a part of our family. He and my sister married when I was only eight years old. The Christmas before they married, he gave me a wonderful present. It had a Chinese checker board on one side and a regular checker board on the other. How I treasured that present! I felt a little sorry for my sister, to whom he gave only a hand-embroidered red robe.

As my brother-in-law lay ill, I wondered if he knew how much that gift had meant to me, and feared that perhaps I had never told him.

After he and my sister were married, I spent many summers with them. Those were wonderful times: picnics,

camping trips, visits to the ice cream parlor and donut shop, and lots of foods and pleasures I never had at home. But I can't remember ever throwing my arms around his neck and thanking him for expanding my world and giving me glimpses of life I wouldn't have had without him. Was it too late for that? Even if I could have expressed my appreciation, he was too sick to care.

Once, after I had married and my husband and I were struggling to make ends meet as college students, I was doing our laundry at my mother's house. On that hot summer day I was perspiring over the ironing board as I pressed my husband's shirts. For a long time, my brother-in-law watched what I was doing and said nothing. The next day, he handed me a fifty-dollar bill and told me to take the shirts to the laundry for a while.

I'm sure I thanked him at the time, but I never told him that money was so scarce for us then that I spent his gift on other things we needed more. He might have appreciated that. But I felt it was probably too late to tell him how much his generosity had meant to us and how often I had thought about it and been grateful to him.

The years have come and gone. My husband and I raised a family. We often saw my sister and her husband and enjoyed our visits together. But I never really took the time to sit down with my brother-in-law and talk about the things that mattered most to both of us. I just sort of took him for granted. I never listened to the story of his life, and I didn't tell him mine. As he neared death, I realized how

much time had elapsed and how it was impossible to go back and redo the things we neglected.

But maybe it wasn't too late for everything.

My brother-in-law survived. The following year, we spent a few days with them after Christmas and had a wonderful time laughing and talking. In fact, my husband asked, "Can we do this again next year?" My brother-in-law's mother had recently died and left him with a house full of furniture and accessories. While we were there, I helped to clean out her house. My brother-in-law told me to take anything out of it I wanted. "Don't hold back," he said. We loaded a few little things into our station wagon. As we were leaving, I hugged him and said, "I love you." He said the same to me.

I am grateful for the little remembrances of him that sit around our house. I treasure them even more, now that he too has died. I remember him each time I look at one of them. He will continue to live at our house through a vase, a lamp, a little table, or a whatnot on the shelf.

The experience with my brother-in-law taught me an important lesson. From now on, I will not wait to pass out my bouquets. I will be sure to tell people I love them while I have the chance to do so. I'll make certain they know what they mean to me.

*Prayer: Whenever I forget, Lord, get behind me and give me a little shove. I don't want to ever be too late again in expressing love and appreciation. Amen.*



## *Presence*

In your presence there is fullness of joy.

—*Psalm 16:11*

Presence has many definitions. The one I'm thinking about is best described by something my brother said after a conversation with someone. "I was talking to Sam," he said. "When I looked in his eyes, I realized no one was at home." Sam's body was present, but his mind was elsewhere.

Nothing irritates me more than trying to talk to someone about an important matter when I feel that the person is not really with me. This treatment makes me feel that what I'm saying is too trite or obvious to deserve his or her attention. My spirit and confidence are diminished. I ask myself, "Am I boring? Am I offensive? Is what I'm trying to say irrelevant? Is my presence embarrassing?"

Because this experience affects me so deeply, I shudder from time to time to think that I may be guilty of not being present to someone else. I may become preoccupied or careless and fail other persons in the very way that bothers me so much. Therefore, I have to consider some rules for being present.

I must think about the hurt and harm my lack of presence can produce in someone else. I must count it an honor that other persons want to confide their thoughts and feelings to me. I must understand that I am the real loser if I don't truly listen to others, because sometimes the simplest statement can carry the most profound meaning. I must remember invariably to listen to my heavenly Teacher, who always has time for everyone and has never failed to be there for me. He will instruct me in the deeper ways of presence.

Presence, after all, is a gift of love.

The worst thing of all, I think, is for me not to be present to God when God wants my attention—to be too busy to listen or to be distracted by something on TV or the radio, to be planning my wardrobe for a trip, or to think about what I need from the store when what I ought to be doing is concentrating on my heavenly Father.

*Prayer: You could not be here more fully, O Lord, but I could. Teach me to center all my attention on you and not be distracted by anything, in order that my whole being may be transformed into an offering for you. Amen.*

## *Silence*

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven ... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.—*Ecclesiastes 3:1-7b*

When our children were growing up, the most difficult thing I had to do sometimes was to remain silent. It would have been so easy to give them all the answers, even before they asked any questions. I could have made all their decisions for them, even before they reached the crossroads. It wouldn't have cost me much or been nearly as hard as staying quiet. Fortunately, somewhere along the way, I learned the importance of not interfering.

One time our son Eric needed a new pair of glasses. He tried on frame after frame. Suddenly he stopped. I almost opened my mouth in horror to say, "Oh, son, not those! You look terrible in wire frames." But I didn't. I noticed the glow on his face. "These are the ones, mom," he said. "Aren't they great?!" He made a choice, and I realized I had to give him the right to enjoy his decision, even if it meant I thought he looked ghastly until it was time for another pair

of glasses. His ability to make decisions for himself was the important issue.

Years later our other son was due home from college. I was rushing from a meeting to greet him. As I drove along the street near our house, I noticed a young, long-haired runner with a bandanna tied around his forehead. He had a beard and was wearing ragged, cut-off jeans and an old sweat shirt that had more holes than Swiss cheese. Some mother, I thought sympathetically, must be really upset at the way her son goes out in public. The thought had barely crossed my mind when suddenly the truth registered: "That is my son!" How I wanted to stop the car and give him a lecture about his appearance. Instead, I reflected and realized that he was in the process of discovering his own identity and learning to take responsibility for the self he was growing into. I think I did a far better thing by stopping the car, throwing out my arms, and saying, "Welcome home, son!"

Love often made me bite my tongue and remain silent. My children really needed hugs and affirmation more than they needed my advice. Now that I think about it, I realize that God is often silent too. When we make mistakes, think the wrong things, or go at life with dubious methods, God must really want to say something to us or reach out and turn us in a new direction. But God remains quiet, like a loving parent, and waits for us to find the way by ourselves. This is the divine tribute to the way we are made and to the relationship we have with the Eternal. God allows us to

make our own decisions, like the prodigal son; but God is always there, like the loving father in that story, to welcome us home with open arms.

*Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for your extraordinary tolerance for all the mistakes we make and crazy things we do. But please give us an occasional nudge in the right direction, so that we don't totally screw up. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## *Beauty*

Let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us.

—*Psalm 90:17a (KJV)*

For the beauty of the earth,  
For the glory of the skies ...

How marvelous it is to wake up in a sun-filled room and know that the day is going to be full of miracles! That must be the way a child wakes up all the time. He or she enters the world each day to experience it without any preconceived ideas of how everything must turn out.

My husband and I were hiking through the woods in a state park recently when we overheard a young father pointing out the wonders of the forest to his four-year-old son. He talked to him about the pine cones, the squirrels, the violets beginning to appear from beneath the leaves, and the deer that occasionally showed themselves by the stream. Suddenly the father noticed that the son wasn't saying anything. "Son," he said, "Aren't you listening?" "Oh yes, Dad," replied the son, a tone of admiration in his voice. "I believe everything you tell me."

The beauty of innocent, trusting love! My heart cries out for a simple, uncomplicated way of seeing the world, so that I too may respond like a child. I want to live in awe on this thrilling stage where God has set us to act out our lives. I want reverently to discover:

All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful,  
The Lord God made them all.

*Prayer: Lord, I want to believe in everything! Amen.*

## *Reassurance*

[God] has given assurance to all.—*Acts 17:31*

All my life I have craved the reassurance that I am loved and accepted. As a child, I could never get enough hugs and verbal acceptance from my parents. Now it is the same with my husband. “Do I look all right?” and “did I say the right thing?” are only the beginning of the thousands of questions I have plied him with over the years.

For years, my husband assumed these questions were asked out of vanity and thought I wanted to hear myself praised. I think he was actually stunned when he realized that vanity had nothing to do with them, that I was so truly lacking in self-esteem and confidence that I needed constant assurance of my worth as a human being.

I have prayed the same prayer for reassurance so many times through the years that God must wonder if I spend all my time and energy focusing on myself. It is so important to me to feel that I’m OK and accepted as a part of everything around me.

A few years ago we attended an engagement party for one of our sons and his fiancée at the fiancée’s home. With



my usual sense of agony over whether I was saying the right things and making the right impression, I was glad when the party was over and we could escape to the safety and quiet of our hotel room.

The next day our son's future mother-in-law called to invite us back for leftovers. She and I were in the kitchen together while the food was heating. She stopped what she was doing to announce to me that this wedding didn't belong just to her family, but that my family was to be included in the planning and preparations too. She made me feel comfortable about my role as the groom's mother. I went home feeling reassured that I was really necessary to the wedding and wasn't merely a bothersome extra that others had to maneuver around.

It's so wonderful to feel that I am a part of the whole, to have the reassurance that I belong and there is a place for me. Sometimes I'm glad to feel unique and different from other people, but most of the time I want to belong and know that I am accepted.

I really admire Jesus, when I think about it. His ministry was to people who felt unacceptable among others—prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, and other outcasts. He claimed that he was doing the work of his Father in heaven. Maybe that's what heaven is all about: feeling totally, utterly, and completely accepted by everybody else who is there. Won't that be something?

*Prayer: There is nothing I want more, O God, than to be enveloped by your arms and feel that I belong there. Please*

*help me, as I go through life, to realize how many other people need love and acceptance too and to open my arms to assure them that they really belong. Amen.*

## *Contentment*

I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

—*Philippians 4:11b*

Contentment with whatever we have is a beautiful thought, but a hard attitude to achieve. On rainy days, most of us wish for sunshine. If we have had a lot of sunshine, we wish for rain. If we're eating a meal that isn't outstanding, we wish for the one that was so good when we had it last week. If we're on the East Coast, we dream about being on the West Coast. If we're out West, we can't wait to get back East. If we don't like something about the church we attend, we wish for another one. Some of us change jobs again and again, trying to find the one that is just right. We're all looking for utopia, our own beautiful, blissful Camelot.

What a shock it is to reach one's middle or later years and discover that we are still searching for the perfect place to be, the perfect house, the perfect mate, or the perfect church. How much of life's precious time we waste by always looking for something better and not enjoying the challenges and rewards of where we are and what we

have. We skim along on the surface of life instead of digging in and discovering the joy and excitement of our present situations. We spend our lives looking for the end of the rainbow when it really lies in our own backyards.

I think about my son, an extraordinarily talented artist. The extent of my own artistic fame was achieved in an art education class in college when I drew a dog that the professor thought was a pig. I am not diminished by the fact that I am not an artist. I can appreciate my son's art.

Once strolling down a street in Colonial Williamsburg, I heard a beautiful soprano voice coming from one of the taverns, singing some beautiful songs from the early period in America. I was stunned by the voice and thought about it for days. But I am content with my warbling alto voice.

Some people amaze me with the feats they can accomplish at the computer—solving puzzles, making graphs, developing formulas, and creating beautiful designs. But I don't have to imitate what they can do. I can be happy with a reasonably good handwriting and a minor skill at typing.

Wonderfully fascinating places to live lure us all over the world. I enjoy visiting them and reading about them and seeing travelogues about them. But this doesn't mean that I can't be happy if I don't live in those places. I enjoy my own home and community and am content to enjoy the other places vicariously.

God has given us an unbelievably rich and diverse world, and it would be wrong to spend our lives longing for what

we cannot have or trying to get what we do not possess. We can be content with knowing it is there and praising the Creator for it. After all, God is reflected in all the world, and our greatest desire is for the Creator, not for some limited part of the creation itself. Maybe this was Paul's secret. He was so happy with God that nothing else mattered much anymore. That's real contentment!

*Prayer: If I ever forget and become discontented with anything, O Lord, remind me of my incredible richness in you, and I shall forget everything else in an instant! Amen.*

## *Kindness*

“God ... slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”—*Joel 2:13*

One rainy day my husband and I were in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. We couldn't hike in the mountains so I enjoyed two of my favorite pursuits: shopping and people watching.

In a clothing store, I noticed an attractive-looking couple at the sweater counter. As I drew closer, I realized they were having a quarrel. The man was using terribly abusive language, and the woman was begging him to please be nice this one time. Her distress appeared to spur him on to even harsher behavior. I was so disquieted by the scene that I had to leave the store.

Later, I stopped in a shop for some frozen yogurt. A mother and her two small boys were in line ahead of me. She asked the older boy what kind of yogurt he wanted. The smaller boy, who looked to be about four, spoke up and said he wanted chocolate. Wheeling around, the mother slapped him in the face and said, “Shut up! I'll order for you!” The clerk and I looked on in amazement, unable to

believe that a mother could behave so cruelly toward that beautiful, upturned face with the wide, excited eyes.

Fortunately, I saw a lot of positive interchanges as well—a father gently cradling his small son who had fallen on the sidewalk, a woman being kind to her elderly mother, and a group of girls in such total harmony that they reminded me of a lot of swallows gliding and dipping and rising in unison—and can testify that they far outweighed the negative occasions.

My heart was warmed by the patience and kindness a middle-aged mother showed her son with Down syndrome. He was looking at CDs in the record store. She suggested ones she knew he would like and asked, “Is that one all right with you?” His face would light up in agreement and he would give her a hug, which she never failed to return.

In one store, a child was purchasing a toy. He asked the sales clerk the price. When she told him, he counted his money and found that he was a few cents short. His little shoulders slumped in disappointment. Another shopper overheard and stepped to the counter. She said she had some extra pennies that were just waiting to be given to a nice little boy. The child’s smile seemed to light up the entire store!

Kindness is so easy to give, and it is so good for us. Nothing else makes the heart lighter or does so much to remove wrinkles. A lack of kindness, by contrast, comes from a withered soul. We ought to remember that kindness begets kindness, just as unkindness, sadly, probably begets

unkindness. I love the motto “Smile and the world smiles with you.”

We have a wonderful model in our Lord, who befriended the meek and helpless and encouraged little children to sit on his lap. When we are kind and good to others, we allow the world to see him again through us. Even on a rainy day, he makes the sun shine in our hearts.

*Prayer: If I can't be brilliant or beautiful, Lord, at least let me be kind—which in the long run may be the most brilliant and beautiful thing I can do. Amen.*



## *Elation*

They sang praises with gladness.

—*2 Chronicles 29:30*

I feel elated this morning. I awoke to bright, glorious sunshine. The whole world was smiling after several days of mist and darkness. When I came downstairs for breakfast, my husband's warm arms encompassed me and I felt safe and warm. With such a loving and positive beginning, what else could one feel but elation?

An impromptu idea came to my mind as we were having breakfast. I shocked my husband by suggesting that we fly to England during his spring break. He said it was a great idea but the break was too short. He suggested that we wait till May and go for a month or two. I called the different airlines for schedules and prices. Maybe we'll follow through and maybe we won't, but it was a time of elation for both of us, just thinking about it.

Elation, joy, and excitement have been missing for a long time from our cluttered lives. It's as if I've been punishing myself by not allowing room for them. I don't really enjoy self-flagellation, but I have surely indulged in it.

Now I'd like to cut loose from all of that and go on a binge of happiness and enthusiasm—just blow everything on a big wall-to-wall party. Maybe I'll pay for it later in feelings of guilt and recrimination, but I'll face that when the time comes. For now, I want to live. I want to feel joyous. I want to celebrate. I want to experience elation!

Isn't that what faith is about, feeling elated without guilt? Doesn't the truest sense of elation we ever feel come from standing in the presence of God? Then I want to be elated now, every day. I want this mood to continue. It's the way my life ought to be—not dull and plodding and filled with clutter, but bright and shining and effusive with happiness.

I'm glad I realized this; it adds to my elation!

*Prayer: Let my heart soar more often, O God. Teach me to be less accepting of the dark, dull days when my heart refuses to soar and to seek your presence so continuously that it just naturally soars all the time. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## *Support*

We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.—*1 Thessalonians 5:14*

An old spiritual I learned once in an African American service says, “Build me up where I have fallen down, prop me up on every leaning side.” Every day, we have opportunities to lend a hand to someone who needs our support. Not just God’s, but ours.

Several years ago, while I was serving as a volunteer pink lady at the hospital, I was assigned to the surgical ward. The waiting room was always filled with people anxiously waiting for word from their loved ones in the operating room. Anything I could do for them was meaningful, whether it was giving them a touch or a hug, speaking a word of reassurance, or getting them a cup of coffee. Even a token amount of support was met with eagerness and gratitude.

In a sense, that hospital room was the world in microcosm. We are always surrounded by hurting, anxious

people needing to be propped up on every leaning side. We can help others in so many ways.

We can listen to friends when they need someone to talk to and provide loving concern and encouragement.

We can visit people who have been ill and take food and flowers to cheer them up.

We can take little gifts to those who live in retirement homes or are confined for reasons of age or physical infirmity to their own homes.

We can volunteer to sit with hospital patients while their family caregivers run necessary errands or just get away for a little while.

We can make a point of including divorced persons in our social agendas, so that they don't feel isolated and alone after the trauma of separation.

We can go out of our way to be kind and thoughtful to young people who are having a problem with drugs or alcohol, so that they have someone to turn to in their hours of deepest need.

We can be kind and sympathetic to people we meet in the supermarket, drugstore, or shopping mall.

Recently, while waiting for a table in a restaurant, I met a lonely young man and listened as he told compulsively of his dating problems and personal hangups. I did little to alleviate his distress—except to lend an attentive ear. He was profusely grateful, as if he had been desperate for another human being with whom to share his story.

A smile, a nod, a wink, a little shrug of the shoulders, a touch on the hand, an embrace, a kiss—these are small and inexpensive gestures of love and support, but they mean so much to persons who are truly hungry for them. There is a side effect, too. When we prop others up where they are leaning, our own foundations become more secure.

*Prayer: It takes so little, Lord, to help others feel better and more loved. Enable me, I pray, to go through life scattering help around me as if I were strewing flowers from a basket. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## *Worth*

Our God will make you worthy of his call.

—*2 Thessalonians 1:11*

I don't know why, but it always seems to amaze people to learn that I do my own housecleaning. If they question me about it, I jokingly reply, "I have to justify my existence." Maybe more than a grain of truth hides in that response. I do feel more worthwhile when I have dusted a floor or scrubbed a shower stall. What really constitutes worth?

Recently I visited a friend who was in a mildly depressed mood. Always a busy, work-oriented person, he had been troubled lately because he didn't think his life counted for much. He holds Mother Teresa as a model for the way his life should be and worried that he had not contributed to society in the way she had. Several times in our conversation he said, "I want to be worth something, to do some good." He was a good man and has meant a lot to many people, but he was not convinced of his value. He wanted to do something of real importance, something outstanding and dramatic.

All of us would like for our deeds to make history the way Mother Teresa's have. We would like to know that our contributions rank with those of great composers, inventors, artists, and statesmen. But we feel lost in our tiny, uneventful corners of the world. We bemoan the fact that no matter what we say or do, it will not make a significant difference. We say that we aren't worth anything, although this is simply not true.

Every person's contribution, regardless of how small it may seem, is important in the overall scheme of things. My friend is doing something worthwhile when he dusts a floor or cleans a shower stall for his family. Maybe he can't go to Calcutta and work the way Mother Teresa did, but he can pray for the success of those who do. The thousands of people who support the work begun by Mother Teresa with their prayers and donations are just as vital, in the eyes of God, as she was.

I think Emily Dickinson summed up the matter beautifully:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
I shall not live in vain;  
If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,  
Or help one fainting robin  
Unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain.

—*Favorite Poems of Emily Dickinson*.<sup>1</sup>

*Prayer: Which of us, O Lord, can consider ourselves worthy beside Christ, who gave his life for the whole world? And yet we are made worthy in him, and invited to live with him forever. What a wonderful destiny we have! Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> *Favorite Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Avenel Press, n.d. [dist. Crown Publishers, 1978]), 24.



## *Gifts*

Every perfect gift, is from above.—*James 1:17*

This is an unusually bright, beautiful morning! Nature is awakening with redbud and fruit trees. Tulips, daffodils, and azaleas are bursting forth in vibrant colors. The birds seem to welcome these signs of spring with their melodic rapture. Even the smell of the morning breeze touches off signals in the body that make one aware of all the fantastic gifts God has given us:

- ordinary gifts
- extraordinary gifts
- surprising gifts
- unsurprising gifts
- demanding gifts
- undemanding gifts

On this perfect day, it is so easy to take all of God's gifts and simply revel in them. Happy, happy, happy!

But something is gnawing at the edge of all this happiness. It whispers, "What are you doing with the gifts God has entrusted to you?"

I respond, "Go away, thought processes. Go away, responsibility. I want to bask in the joy of this moment. I want to luxuriate in the freedom of this experience."

But the gnawing continues. Every time I try to snuff out the voice, its volume increases. "Use your gifts for God and God's children," it says. "They were given to you to develop and use, not to be put on a shelf and admired."

The struggle ceases only when I realize that it is all right to enjoy the wonderful gifts God has given me if I reciprocate by trying to cultivate my personal gifts and employ them unsparingly for God's own enjoyment and fulfillment. The gift tags must read, "To me, with love, from God." "To God, with love, from me."

*Prayer: There are days, O God, when all the world seems a gift. Help me to open it, and then to share it with everyone else. In Christ's name. Amen.*

## *Gratitude*

We always give thanks to God.—*1 Thessalonians 1:2*

“Thank you” is something we say so often that it almost loses its meaning. It is an automatic response we make to waiters who bring our food, to persons who hold the door open for us, to sales associates who locate items we couldn’t find in the store, or to members of our families who surprise us with gifts. It may be said with enthusiasm, grudgingness, amazement, or sarcasm. However it is said, it is said almost constantly—and appropriately so.

We have so many things for which to be thankful:

- God
- life
- families
- love
- happiness
- beauty
- health
- learning

The list is endless—as endless as my gratitude on this day for life itself and for the chance to be writing this.

I have always liked the name of Brother David Steindl-Rast's book *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*. He is right, I think. To learn to be thankful to God—and all the time, not just occasionally—is to learn to pray. It is to discover our most intimate relationship with the Holy One, and be bound to him by the cords of love.

Not to be thankful—truly and deeply thankful—is not to notice, not to live, and not to be aware at all. And the converse is true: to be thankful, to feel great bonds of gratitude to God our Maker, is to be most alive, regardless of what is happening to us in other ways. A person can be on his or her death bed, and life can be ebbing away, but if that person is deeply and truly engaged in thanking God for all God's gifts, that person is vastly alive, much more than many of us who scurry about all day and never stop to say thank you at all.

I do so want to be thankful!

*Prayer: If my soul can learn one thing today, Lord, make it gratitude. Help me to be open and sensitive to everything, so that I am fully and completely alive. For Jesus' sake. Amen.*

## *Blessings*

[The earth] receives a blessing from God.

—*Hebrews 6:7*

“Count your blessings,” said the old hymn, “name them one by one.” I grew up singing those words. They were set to a lively tune and were easy for a young girl to remember. But I don’t recall that I ever really contemplated their message at the time.

“Count your many blessings,” it continued, “see what God has done.”

It was enough, back then, to sing in the church choir or just be with all those down-to-earth people in the congregation. I didn’t really feel a need to enumerate my blessings. Now that I’m older, I do need to enumerate them. I have traveled enough and seen enough—both at home and abroad—to know how lucky I am to have a home, to be loved, and to be comfortable.

Blessings from God: I have worked with adults who couldn’t read or write and couldn’t even read the labels on cans at the grocery store. How fortunate I was to go to school and begin a process of lifelong learning!

Blessings from God: I have a friend who is blind. She is wonderful and courageous and puts many of us who are sighted to shame. But her world is so much more circumscribed than mine.

Blessings from God: Friends have died of cancer, AIDS, and other dreadful diseases and have made me more aware of the fragile beauty of life itself.

Blessings from God: I have seen broken families and homes with little, if any, love and realize how important my husband and children have been to me.

Blessings from God: My world has been unspeakably rich in both people and things. I cannot begin to count all of them. I can only sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"

*Prayer: It humbles me, O God, to realize how awfully blessed I have always been, especially when I have seen so many endure so much in this world. I can only pray that my life may be used in some way to enable your blessings to reach others. Through Christ my Lord. Amen.*

## *Journey*

He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem.

—*Luke 13:22*

Some people love to plan trips. They pore over travel books and maps day after day, dreaming of faraway places but never actually going anywhere. They imagine that the trips are too expensive or that they might become ill while traveling. They play the “what if” game and stay home, missing out on wonderful adventures.

I even know people who live their professional lives this way. They spend long hours at the office or burn the midnight oil at home thinking about great plans for the future that might lead to job promotions or moving to some new and exotic city. But they never carry out these plans because of the pitfalls they fear they would encounter in doing so. They remain cocooned in their safe environments and eventually retire.

Some of us continually brainstorm about the things we ought to be doing for God’s little ones. We imagine how we could change life for the underprivileged. We mentally

arrange programs to feed the hungry. We design suitable shelters for the homeless. We contemplate ways of eliminating prejudice from society. We are full of plans, but we seldom do anything because we don't want to take the risk of confrontation or failure.

The single thread running through all of life's nonoccurring journeys is the fear that something unpleasant might happen. But something unpleasant can also happen when we are merely playing it safe. We can miss out on the growth and excitement that come from making a real journey.

As someone I know who had a hard life once said, "God didn't promise us an easy way; he only promised us a safe arrival at the end." Wouldn't it be wise, in that case, to embark on as many real journeys as possible? Even if there are risks along the way, we know they will all end safely in God.

Happy traveling!

*Prayer: Jesus' journeying ended in crucifixion, O God, and I have promised to follow him. But what would the world be today if he hadn't taken the journeys he took? Amen.*



## *Friends*

A true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin.

—*Proverbs 18:24b*

Isn't it wonderful to have the love and support of friends? Once, my brother-in-law was in critical condition in a hospital many miles from his home. His daughter was staying with him. My family and I had once lived in the city, so I phoned an old friend and asked her to check on my relatives and give them the support they needed.

This friend visited the daughter several times, giving her moral support and encouragement. Once, she even prepared lunch and took it to her at the hospital. After each visit, she called us with a report of my brother-in-law's progress. She was an invaluable help in a very difficult time, like the good Samaritan in Jesus' story.

Friends wear many hats. Some are saints. Their endurance level goes beyond the imagination. No matter how much abuse they suffer, they continue to wear sweet smiles and speak encouraging words. They are our Christian role models.

Other friends are missionaries. When we are ill or have experienced tragic events, they are the first at our doors with homemade chicken soup and a basket of flowers. Their message is that God cares and so do they.

Many friends are musicians. They seek harmony in personal relationships. They are even skilled at working miracles with tone-deaf choirs.

Perhaps the friends who are most appreciated are the unselfish financiers, those who give generously to the poor, hungry, and disadvantaged of the world. They know full well they will never receive any monetary return on their investments, but they take seriously Jesus' command, "Feed my sheep" (Jn. 21:17).

Surely the best friend anyone can have is the sacrificer, the one who is willing to undergo any amount of personal pain, injury, or inconvenience in behalf of someone else. Jesus was this kind of friend. He gave up everything for us. When I think of him, I remember a little song I learned as a child, which goes like this: "My best friend is Jesus. Praise him. Love him. Serve him." His goodness and kindness make me want to pray the prayer of Patrick of Ireland, written in the fifth century:

Christ be with me,  
Christ within me,  
Christ behind me,  
Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore me,  
Christ beneath me,

Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet,  
Christ in danger,  
Christ in mouth of friend or stranger.

*Prayer: Lord, help me to be the kind of friend Jesus has  
been to me. For his name's sake. Amen.*

## *Hugs*

[There is] a time to embrace.—*Ecclesiastes 3:5b*

Arms are for hugging. At least, that's what I told our children when they were very small. Now grown, they are the best huggers around. Hugs from my family and friends mean a great deal to me. They assure me that I am loved and secure. They are a comfort when the most devastating events occur. Hugs are surely a blessing from God.

One of the most important hugs of my life came while my husband and I were serving a church in Los Angeles. After the annual community Thanksgiving service, most people had hurried off to prepare the feast of the day. A few of us were still standing around, chatting, and feeling good that we had experienced a meaningful service and were looking forward to further celebrations.

I happened to look away from the group and saw a dirty, ragged, pitifully thin man coming toward us. I suggested to the group that we move and not deal with another street person that day. After all, it was Thanksgiving. But the man followed us. Confrontation was unavoidable.

He didn't ask us for money, though; he asked if we had anything to eat. My husband said no, but he would get the man a cup of coffee. He went inside the church, found some coffee, and put a lot of sugar and cream in it so the man would at least get a little nutriment.

"I have AIDS," announced the man. "My parents kicked me out. I've been sleeping in the park. Last night some guys mugged me and stole my wallet and my shoes."

This explained the poor man's condition. There was blood on his face and in his beard. He was wearing plastic bags tied on his feet.

As he talked, the man began to cry, and I put my arms around him. He said it had been a long time since anybody hugged him. He asked if he might kiss my cheek. By that time, we were both crying. I continued to hold him and rock him, the way I had once rocked my own boys.

When my husband returned with the coffee, he said he had phoned an AIDS hospice that would take the man in and had called a cab. He put him in the cab, paid the driver, and directed him to the hospice, where the man would be given a good dinner and cared for as long as he needed it.

During the years when our sons were growing up, I always sent them off to school in the morning with a hug, a kiss, and a reminder: "My arms are around you." I thought about that as I watched that poor, frail man shuffling off to that taxi. I said under my breath, "My arms are around you, too."

I had received a hug I would never forget.

My husband called at the hospice. The man died a couple of weeks later. I pray that he is now with God, forever enfolded in the arms of the One who will never discriminate against him, persecute him, or abandon him. What did Luke say in his Gospel? “The poor man died and was carried ... to Abraham’s bosom” (Lk. 16:22a, NASB).

*Prayer: Lord, I’m glad I’m a hugger. I wish everybody were. Please keep us all in your arms today, and help us to feel loved and comforted. Through Christ, who died on the cross with outstretched arms. Amen.*

## *Forgiveness*

If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

—*Matthew 6:14*

A female member of a large family I know had set about systematically destroying relationships within it. She made telephone calls to several brothers and sisters with malicious stories about another brother and his wife. Then she called that brother and his wife and told them the bad things the rest of the family were saying about them. That brother's wife became very upset and immediately telephoned the other family members. Without giving them a chance to tell her they had not said or done anything to harm her and her husband, she made angry statements to them and ordered them never to come to her home again.

The rest of the family was bewildered and shocked by all of this. They loved their brother and his wife and could not understand what was happening. After two years of this unsettling feud, all the family members were brought together by the hospitalization of their elderly father. In the exchange they had in the hospital, they discovered what

evil the one family member had perpetrated, and everyone made peace with the sister-in-law who had spoken so angrily to them. She kept saying, over and over, “Can you ever forgive me?” They did forgive her and assured her that they did.

The entire family was happily reunited—except for the one member who had caused the trouble in the first place. She was unrepentant and did not want to be forgiven. She didn’t learn anything from the pain she caused. She continued trying to sow seeds of discord in the family.

This kind of behavior is hardly new. In fact, it is as old as recorded history. Cain murdered his brother Abel. Jacob stole the birthright of his brother Esau. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery. The older brother in Jesus’ story of the prodigal son despised his brother and resented his return to the father’s house.

Unfortunately, troublemakers are not only found in families. They are also in churches, schools, clubs, corporations, and entire communities. These people are always stirring up hatred and unhappiness, discontent, and resentment. The wounds they inflict on the hearts of others are often slow to heal. Sometimes the scars never go away.

The people who sent Jesus to the cross were troublemakers. They were cruel and thoughtless. It is almost unthinkable that people should be forgiven for such things. Yet even as Jesus was dying on the cross he said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34).



Somehow, no matter how difficult it may be, the family must also be forgiving toward the one who tries to tear it apart. When someone causes us pain, we must try to apply the principle of Christ. Perhaps, as God's forgiveness has made a difference in our lives, it will make a difference in the troublemaker's life. As we are reminded by the scriptures, "Forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you" (Col. 3:13).

*Prayer: It is hard to forgive, O Lord, when we have been deeply wounded by another. Help us to remember Jesus on the cross and try to follow him, knowing that as we forgive others, you will forgive us. For his sake. Amen.*

## *Compassion*

All of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

—1 Peter 3:8

I wish compassion could be scientifically measured, put into capsules, and prescribed for everyone to swallow at least four times a day. Or I wish each of us could have a container of such capsules marked “Take As Needed.”

I longed for such a miracle drug several years ago when I became involved with a group of women who met once a week for spiritual growth and enrichment. The group spent several months searching for appropriate topics to discuss and finally settled into a kind of gossip circle that badmouthed poor, unsuspecting husbands.

Two women in particular seemed to relish the opportunity of discussing their mates in a negative, punitive light. They convinced themselves that their husbands needed to undergo total personality transformations or else face very drastic consequences.

I knew the husbands in question. Maybe they were in a rut and a little too complacent about their ways of life. But

they were basically good, gentle men who didn't deserve the fierce condemnation heaped on them by their wives in those weekly meetings.

The wives made no attempt whatsoever to understand their husbands' feelings. They merely fed one another's anger and bitterness, and fulfilled the psalmist's question, "Has he [she] in anger shut up his [her] compassion?" (Ps. 77:9).

Here's another example. One of the churches my husband served as a minister had a thrift shop filled with used clothing and household articles donated for needy people. At a meeting in which the thrift shop was discussed, a woman asked why the prices were so high. "I mean," she said, "if we're doing it for poor people, shouldn't we keep the prices as low as possible?" What she feared, she went on to explain, was that a lot of the homeless people who frequented the shop simply couldn't afford to buy anything.

The manager of the thrift shop, a proud, haughty woman, sniffed: "That's why we set the prices so high. It keeps out the riffraff!"

How I longed for that compassion pill. For a whole bottle of them! I wanted to remind that manager of a verse in Colossians: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Col. 4:12a). I myself needed a pill for meekness and patience!

On another occasion in that same church, a festive party was in progress following a Sunday service. Platters were laden with sandwiches and holiday sweets, and the air was filled with joy and excitement. A dirty, raggedly dressed man wandered in off the street and approached one of the food tables. Swooping down upon the situation like a hawk, one of the church elders grabbed up the platter of food from the table and said, "This is not for you!" The elder had so much and the homeless man had so little. What happened to the elder's sense of compassion and justice?

The Bible gives example after example of God's compassion and mercy, from God's sparing the nation Israel after it had been stubborn and rebellious to the way Christ forgave the men who nailed him to the cross. Why can't we, in turn, remember to be generous and forgiving? We may not have a compassion pill to swallow, but at least our faith prescribes an open and loving spirit. What positive results we could get from that prescription! It could make all the difference in the world!

*Prayer: Lord, I know I am guilty of having little compassion for those who have little or no compassion. Forgive me, and help me to be more merciful toward them, as you are merciful toward me. Amen.*

## *Words*

“By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” —*Matthew 12:37*

“Words, words, words,” says an exasperated Eliza Doolittle in the musical *My Fair Lady*. “All I ever hear is words.” It can be truly mind-boggling to consider all the words we hear and use in a single day.

But words are an essential part of our lives at every stage of our existence.

Infants respond to gentle words with smiles and coos.

Toddlers experiment with sounds and learn to use the words they hear from their parents and siblings.

Elementary school children spend a lot of time memorizing new words to expand their mental and emotional horizons.

Teenagers often mint their own vocabularies and sometimes develop selective deafness toward the words of older persons.

Young adults respond enthusiastically to certain words that are filled with hope and promise for them.

Middle-aged persons continue to have adventures with words, discovering their romance, impact, and individuality.

Older persons reflect on the words they have known and their associations with them, often with smiles and wonderment.

Words form a complete circle from the gentle beginning of life to its gentle ending. From start to finish, we experience an incredible, almost inexhaustible torrent of words. Eliza Doolittle was right. “Words, words, words”—countless numbers of words. What do we do with so many of them?

Hopefully, we choose them wisely, use them carefully, respect their value, profit from their repetition, give thanks for their beauty, and ponder their meaning. Prayerfully, we repeat, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord” (Ps. 19:14).

*Prayer: I am seldom without words, O God, except when I come to you and try to express my love and gratitude for your boundless goodness to me. Then words fail me, and I bow my head in humility and wonder. Amen.*

## *Time*

[They] would spend their time in nothing.

—*Acts 17:21*

Someone once wrote, “Time misspent is not lived but lost.” That’s a frightening thought, isn’t it? How much of my life have I really lost, as surely as if I had not had it at all or as if it had been sucked down a big, dark hole somewhere?

I have wasted so much time on trivial matters—fretting over something I would soon forget, shopping for something I didn’t really need, reading a book or magazine that contained nothing of importance, or watching a TV show that was totally frivolous and pointless.

I have spent so many hours whimpering to myself over bad experiences, especially the rudeness or unkindness of others that made me feel unworthy or rejected. I have heard that people can’t do anything to you that you don’t allow them to do. But at times, when my energy is low, my defenses are weak, and my self-esteem seems to have gone on vacation, I can’t help feeling hurt. What a waste of time it really is!

All those hours worrying that I have misspent other hours! That's ironic, isn't it, spending time worrying about other time not well invested. I worry that I didn't fulfill my promise as a student. I worry that I wasn't as good a mother as I should have been. I worry that I didn't become the pianist I might have become. I worry that I haven't served God as I wanted to.

My father, who was a frugal man, used to talk about throwing good money after bad. Well, this is throwing good time after bad. I just can't seem to stop doing it. I want to live my time and not lose it.

When am I really living it and not wasting it? When I am doing something for someone else. When I am learning and growing as a person. When I am consciously in the presence of God, feeding on divine love and grace.

I suppose it all comes down to being a good manager and not spending my time in the wrong ways. The Bible calls it "redeeming the time." I hope I can do it. I do so want to feel at peace before time runs out!

*Prayer: I long for the life with you, O God, when everything becomes timeless. Then nothing will ever be lost or wasted, forever and ever. Amen.*



## *Justice*

O God, judge the earth.—*Psalm 82:8a*

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, justice means "fairness, reward or penalty, rightfulness, power to uphold what is right, to be tried in court and duly punished." But how justice is meted out depends on who is in charge of it. Justice can be good or bad, fair or unfair, soft or harsh, merited or unmerited. If it were left in the hands of God, we would have no cause for alarm because God is always righteous. But justice can be problematic when human beings become the prosecutor, judge, and jury.

I don't have the compassion God has. I seldom see the whole picture—only the little part that affects me or people close to me. I tend to react with passion and prejudice when I think my space has been invaded or my rights violated.

Not long ago, I received a letter from one of my aunts. She enclosed a card written by another aunt. It contained some malicious gossip about a member of our family. It was

not only malicious gossip—it was *secondhand* malicious gossip.

I confess I'm not good at handling things like that. I get all stirred up. The gossip was terribly unjust. How was I supposed to feel about it? What does my faith say that is relevant to such a situation? Did Jesus give a parable that would deal with it? Oh, I know we're not supposed to be anxious and we're supposed to forgive "seventy times seven" and all that. But in the meantime, what happens to justice?

I began burning with indignation over injustice when I was only a child. A girl named Gwen and I exchanged pencil boxes when we were in the first grade. When I came home with a different box, my mother accused me of stealing it. I protested, but she didn't believe me. I was humiliated and filled with rage. I didn't steal the pencil box, and it was wrong of her to treat me as if I had!

My mother and father were always making me feel as if I had done something wrong. Sometimes I want to hold and rock that little girl who so often crouched by the bureau, afraid that the world would find out she was such a bad child. She lived with the words ringing in her ears, "You are guilty, you are guilty, you are guilty."

Now I still feel guilty, but I also feel outraged by injustice wherever it occurs. Having been made to feel guilty when I wasn't only increases my sense of rage. It is awful to live with a sentence of guilt when I am not actually guilty. I often think I've done something wrong when I haven't. I

wonder how others could love me. I even wonder how God could love me. I don't feel worthy of love.

The whole thing is complicated by this terrible sense of anger about injustice. I feel as if I am beating on an unscalable wall with clenched fists, crying out for justice in a world where there is none. I know what my problem is. I am still trying to be prosecutor, judge, and jury. I am trying to take God's place. God is the real prosecutor, judge, and jury—not I.

I keep praying for the day when I can turn all of these feelings over to God and hear God say, "Not guilty."

Then, I suppose, I will feel that there is real fairness in the world and that I am fully and unconditionally accepted. When that time comes, I will stop feeling rage about other injustice in the world. I will truly be at peace in myself and can become an agent of peace to others.

*Prayer: You alone are just, O God, and you are also merciful. Be merciful to me, I pray, and create true justice in my heart. Then I will praise you for both of these important qualities. Amen.*

## *Independence*

For freedom Christ has set us free.—*Galatians 5:1*

When our youngest son was beginning to talk in sentences, the words I seemed to hear most often were, “I do myself!” If I started to hold a door for him, he said, “I do myself.” If I offered to tie his shoelaces, he said, “I do myself.” If I tried to comb his hair, he said, “I do myself.” He was such a little man! He grew up into a big man who still says, in many ways, “I do myself!” He likes his sense of independence and feels better when he does everything for himself.

I wonder if we are sometimes too independent for our own good. I wish young people today could listen to their parents about things like sex and drugs. Many of them don't seem to realize that the parents aren't trying to manage their lives; they only want to impart some wisdom to the children that will save them from grief and trouble. I also wish that older folks could accept help from their children without feeling that it is demeaning or that they will lose their independence. I wish we could all learn to rely on one another more than we do and feel a sense of joy in the goodwill of others when it is extended.

Accepting help when we need it isn't a sign of weakness. In fact, it can often be a sign of intelligence. I have friends who complain that their husbands are too stubborn to stop and ask directions at a service station when they become lost while traveling. That seems silly to me. Why should people go in circles to prove their independence when a question or two could put them on the right track and save precious time for other things?

My husband was the pastor of a church where some people demonstrated their independence by never letting anyone else know when they were ill in the hospital. What wonderful opportunities for interaction and fellowship they missed! Other people didn't want news of deaths in their families announced so that friends could call or visit, send flowers, and join them in the grieving process. They will never know what their sense of independence cost them!

I appreciate my independence as much as anyone; I hope I never lose it. But I am also grateful for my interrelatedness to my family and friends and to the greater society beyond them. Life is too big for me to live it by myself. It was meant for sharing and caring.

Our son understands this now. He still likes to do things for himself, but he knows how comforting it is to have other family members who are there when he needs them. I feel the same way about God. I don't ask God for everything I need; a lot of things I can take care of myself. But it is always reassuring to know I can call on my heavenly Father when I need to.

*Prayer: You have made us with a sense of self-governance, O God, that can be wonderfully fulfilling. But sometimes we become stubbornly independent and run our lives off the road and into the ditch. Teach us to live with sensitivity to our own weaknesses, so that we rely more and more upon you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## *Faith*

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.—*Hebrews 11:1*

How frequently in my prayers these days I cry out for help, acknowledging the fact that I am lost and confused. For years, I was a minister's wife. Then my husband retired from pastoring and will probably never do that again. I find myself floundering from a lack of identity, feelings of worthlessness, a sense of loneliness, and a shortage of faith. I feel abandoned, like a fish that has been washed up on the shore and can't find its way back to the sea. I'm impatient for answers. When will my life settle into normal routines again? When will I be happy again just being who I am?

When I was a child, I depended on my parents to care and provide for me. Then I grew up, married, and shifted my dependence onto my husband. One day I realized that I was responsible for me. I began blossoming into a person on my own, capable of handling all kinds of situations.

Faith in my parents, faith in my husband, faith in myself—but where did God fit into all of this? What about faith in

God?

For years, I boasted that I relied on God for everything. But did I really? If I did, why was I so afraid when I boarded an airplane? Why did I sit there with a list of scriptural texts in my hand?

- “I am with you always” (Mt. 28:20b).
- “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” (Ps. 27:1)
- “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” (Mt. 8:26)
- “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge” (Ps. 18:2).

If I was really relying on God, why did I need that list? Why was my faith so weak? Why is it so weak now? Why do I feel so lost and confused?

Maybe that’s the nature of faith. It isn’t about getting over fear and confusion, only about coping with them. It’s about having a name to call on when we’re in despair. It’s about calling out in the dark and knowing someone is there. Maybe that’s the answer. I am floundering now, but I know a hand is reaching out to me in the dark. One of these days, I will find it, and I won’t be lost any more. Not for a while. Then I will be lost again, and I will cry out again. Again the hand will be there. I can accept life like that. It gives me something to go on. I know I am never alone.

*Prayer: Thank you, God, for being there when I need you most, and for stretching forth a hand if I call out to you. I*



*am trying to be content with this until I die and see you  
face to face. Amen.*

## *Beginning*

In the beginning ... God created.—*Genesis 1:1*

When I was growing up, Easter was my favorite time of the year. It always came when the earth was being reborn. Shoots were sprouting up all over my father's newly planted garden. Once-bare winter tree limbs were adorned with brightly colored blossoms and waxy baby leaves. Birds were singing so cheerfully that all of their songs seemed new. The very air was fresh with the promise of good things ahead.

Although our family was relatively poor, my mother always saw that I had a new outfit to wear on Easter Day. She usually made my clothes and purchased small accessories from the department store. We would lay the pieces of the outfit on the bed and lovingly admire them. I was always so excited that I thought my skin wouldn't hold me!

At those times, the whole world seemed to be full of anticipation. Everything was aimed at that special day of celebration, when it would be trumpeted abroad that Christ was raised, and because he lived, we too would live. I have

never forgotten the sense of new beginning I always felt. It was as if the old slate of my life had been scrubbed clean and I could start all over again. I wanted to sing and dance and fly with the angels.

Beginnings are wonderful:

the beginning of the school year, when routine and discipline and learning take over again; the fun of ball games, dances, dating; discovering a subject that opens new doors to life; sharing the laughter and excitement that echo in the halls;

the beginning of marriage, with its high hopes and dreams about to be fulfilled;

the beginning of family life, when children come into the home and all our understanding is transposed into a completely new key;

the beginning of a new job, with all the interesting relationships and experiences it will entail;

the beginning of a new phase of life when we move from one place to another, or one season of our existence to another.

Isn't it remarkable how many beginnings God has created for us?

Then, one day, a shadow falls across all beginnings, and death stops them all. At least, that's what I thought until one day when our ten-year-old son corrected me.

One of my husband's colleagues had died very suddenly. Seated at his desk at the university, he simply slumped over. When I heard the news, I began to cry. How sad it was, I thought, for his wife and children—for all of us. Our son saw the tears on my face.

"Why are you crying, Mommy?" he asked.

I tried to explain to him about our friend and the fact that he had died.

"Oh, Mommy," he said, "Don't cry. Death is only the spawning of a new life."

I looked at his sweet, young face. What wisdom it was hiding!

My son was right. Death is only another beginning—the most important one, in fact. Death is life with the Creator of everything, the Master of all new beginnings.

In the end—is the beginning!

*Prayer: I have never been able to wait to begin something new, O God, and now I can't wait to begin my eternal life with you. But give me patience and help me to be useful while I wait, and I shall praise you for life itself! Through Christ my Lord. Amen.*

# An Inner Journey to Easter



**Anne Kathryn Killinger** has written two novels and several magazine articles and has been a contributor to several collections of devotions. She was educated at the University of Kentucky, George Peabody College for Teachers, and the New England Conservatory for Music. Aside from being an author, she has taught piano at Georgetown College in Georgetown, Kentucky, and at St. Catherine's Preparatory Academy in Nashville, Tennessee. Anne is married to John Killinger, well-known minister, teacher, and writer.

Somewhere in the back of our minds we know Lent is coming. As holiday activities are dying down, we briefly

recognize that Lent and Easter are just around the corner. Yet too often we allow our busy lives to take control so that it seems we are teleported straight from New Year's Day to Holy Week, and we are running about trying to make Easter dinner arrangements and wardrobe selections.

Where is the time of self-examination and reflection that helps us prepare for the joy of Easter morning? *An Inner Journey to Easter* makes our hearts ready to celebrate Christ's resurrection and the new life it brings to all of us.