



## A Morning Redeemed by Rebecca Weber

My bedroom lay desolate that Friday morning. The walls were bare. The corners were empty and dusty. Most of the contents of the room had been cleared out so that my brothers could start renovating it. I had still slept in it last night, my small desk was crammed full of papers, and the desk chair was still there.

The desolation in my soul matched my surroundings. I sat in the office chair trying to memorize verses from 1 John. But the words just bounced, never taking residence in my mind.

Why were so many of my mornings lately fraught with these feelings of dimness and emptiness? My Bible and journal lay before me. I wrote, “Lord, I feel broken and empty again. I come to be mended and filled. Lord, help me to love truly and live in the light.”

Finally, I just brought the mess to God in a few words of prayer. *Lord, this needs to change. A child of Yours shouldn't sit here like such a wreck every morning. Please come and fill my heart today.*

It was time to get moving. The day before, I had told my students we would bake bread for art class today. It had seemed like such a wonderful idea, but I hadn't had time to get everything ready last night because of a meeting.

When I came down to the kitchen, Dad was bent over the little cookstove, poking at a piece of wood in the fire. The air was still chilly. The kitchen was a mess. Racks of laundry dried around the stove, and some of last night's unwashed dishes had overflowed onto the floor because the counters were full.

Judith stood at the sink and turned to me. “I'm glad to see you! I didn't know what to make for your lunch and thought maybe you'd know.”

Dad laughed and looked up from the stove, poker in midair. “You're a problem,” he teased.

I laughed and headed to the basement for a bucket to put spelt grain into for my baking project. Dad's words were still rolling around in my head. I paused and said over my shoulder, “I'm trying to stop telling myself that.” Surely God was enough to sustain me even though I felt like a liability. I scurried down

the steps and hunted around for a small bucket to take with me. Then to find some milk for the bread, and olives and a jar of beans to make a lunch with. My arms were full when I went back up the steps.

The bucket of spelt in the cupboard was almost empty. Now I had to go out through the snow to the storage shed and refill it. When I got there, the door wouldn't open; the improvised wooden bolt had frozen in place.

Mom was just going by from milking the cow. “How do you open this door?” I shouted.

She sent my brother to help me. His strength easily threw back the bolt. Inside the shed, I wrenched open the lid of the spelt barrel. The grain I dipped into my bucket was plump and golden, but I hardly had time to notice that. I staggered back to the house with my bucket.

Then for the other things I would need. *Yeast. Bowls. Oh yes, a kettle to heat the milk.* At least I had managed to pack up kitchen aprons and some other supplies in a bag the evening before—the bag was ready on the counter. Now for a box for our countertop grain mill.

The mill had been Mom's idea. “If you want to show the students the process, it would be good for them to see how you grind the grain too.” So, I nestled it in a large box alongside the baking pans.

It was nearly time for breakfast, and still I hadn't given my lunch much attention. Mom asked Selema to help me.

“I thought I could just have a bean salad,” I told her, while scurrying to check my list of needed baking items. “It needs olives.”

She turned toward the cellar to get them, but I stopped her. “No, they're already here. Just dump them in with the beans.”

She came back slowly, bewildered. I had no time to explain but gestured toward the can of olives on the counter. Judith was already putting the canned beans in a bowl and adding dressing.

Then we sat down for breakfast. I gulped my food and went over my mental list of what I needed for the

## The Lord of Hosts

Upon a throne, high lifted up,  
The Lord of Hosts is reigning.  
Isaiah glimpsed in ages past  
His glory—never waning.  
And 'round His throne the seraphim  
Cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"  
While thoughtless earthlings blunder on  
In pride, rebellion, folly.  
Though seldom man twice thinks his ways,  
God pondereth his doings;  
And grieves to see the harvest gained,  
Through selfish, vain pursuings.  
Could we but ponder where our steps  
Will plot our destination!  
And may it bring self-confidence  
To broken desperation.  
O Lord, anoint our eyes that we  
Thy holiness may see;  
That we might tremble at Thy Word,  
And whisper, "Woe is me."  
Upon His throne, high lifted up  
The Lord Jehovah reigneth.  
To all who ask. And seek. And wait.  
His glory never waneth. — Jerald Miller

day. *There is a storm coming*, I remembered. *What if school closes early, and I don't even have a chance to do my baking project?*

It was time to leave. Mom helped me stuff my lunch in my bag. I loaded my assortment of bags and boxes into the car.

At school, I carried some of my supplies inside. *But where is the bucket of spelt grain I went to such lengths to fetch this morning?* "I knew I'd forget something," I muttered.

I set my book bag on the floor in my classroom and dug out my phone to dial my family's home number. I pictured the scene. They would still be relaxing around the table, maybe having family devotions.

"Hello," Judith answered.

"Hello." I rushed to my reason for calling. "I forgot

my grain for grinding. Could someone bring it over sometime before lunch hour?"

After the call, I scurried to arrange things in my classroom and lay out my planner for the day. Then I went over to a co-teacher's classroom for a quiz I needed from her files. We chatted briefly.

I was just ready to head back to my classroom through the crowd of students in the entrance hall when the chairman of the school board appeared at the door. "Did you hear that we'll probably be closing school early?" he asked.

So my rush had been in vain after all? "I hadn't heard anything yet."

"We're expecting to close at lunchtime because the storm will be getting worse this afternoon. We'll let you know for sure later."

I thanked him and returned to my classroom, my mind still in a whirl. There would be no bread baking today. I sent a message home to call off the grain delivery.

Then I looked at my pile of baking pans and the flour mill. So much for my crazy morning. I could have known it would turn out this way.

A line from a talk my family had listened to popped into my mind. "God has a sense of humor." I couldn't help but laugh. What was God thinking as He looked at me? Was He smiling at my headlong morning rush and the storm He had known all along would change my wonderful plans?

I went to the bathroom to fill my water bottle. One of the upper-grade girls joined me at the sink. "Good morning!" I greeted her.

"Good morning," she said. There was a pause. Then she said, "You're always so cheerful in the morning."

I was speechless. *Me? Me, cheerful—in the morning?* Was she talking about the same person who had sat before God in desolation that very morning? The same person who raced herself frazzled in pursuit of baking bread for art class and throwing together a lunch she wouldn't even need? I stuttered something about often feeling lacking in morning cheerfulness and having a hard time getting going early, but that I was glad she had been blessed.

I returned to my classroom, ready for a half day of school and full of gratitude for God's faithfulness and the way He had redeemed my morning.

# He Shall Direct Thy Paths

by Delphine Ramer

*A true account with names and minor details changed*

The inviting aroma of fresh coffee filled the room as Dennis turned on the “Open” sign. “You know, Cathy,” he addressed his wife, “the Lord has been good to us in making it possible to keep this coffee shop going since we moved to the Ozarks.”

Cathy finished arranging the bags of caramel popcorn and straightened the cups on the counter. “Yes, we are blessed, even though there weren’t quite as many tourists in town this summer with the economy the way it is.”

She pointed to one of the Scripture mottoes that read *Pray Without Ceasing*. “I keep praying we can add Bibles and Christian books to our inventory, but I don’t know how we would finance that.”

The door opened, and a plainly dressed couple entered. “Good morning! How may I help you?” Dennis asked, his smile welcoming them.

“We’re just getting acquainted with your area,” the man answered. He scanned the beverage choices handwritten on the blackboard. “Iced coffee sounds good. Feels like another warm day.” He turned to his wife, who nodded in agreement.

Cathy filled two tall glasses and set them on the table.

“Where are you folks from?” Dennis wondered.

“We live about an hour and a half northwest of here. I’m Matthew, and this is my wife Brenda.”

“Glad to meet you,” Dennis said. “So you’re new here. Did you notice all the tourist shops on Main Street? Since this is an old town, there’s even a historical museum. About two blocks from here, the road crosses the White River, with tall rock bluffs overlooking it. Nice scenery, and quite an attraction for boaters and fishermen.”

“Sounds interesting. We hope to see more of the town later,” Matthew said. He motioned toward the wall. “I like all the Scripture verses you have displayed. Proverbs 3:5, 6 has always been one of my favorite Bible passages.”

“Mine too,” Dennis replied. “We do sell some wall hangings and other gifts, but I’d really like to offer Christian books as well. The problem is that most suppliers require an initial investment worth thousands of dollars, so we can’t afford to get started.”

Matthew stole an astonished glance at Brenda. “We’re involved in a Christian book and Bible ministry. In fact, that’s the reason we came here today. We would like to find a vendor interested in displaying

a bookrack.”

“Come here, Cathy,” Dennis called. “These people have Bibles and good books for sale.”

Cathy set down the coffeepot and reached for a book Matthew held out. She glanced at the cover. “You may stock any books you please. I just know this is from the Lord.”

“You might as well set up two racks,” Dennis added. “It’s exciting to see how God is answering our prayer.”

“I’ll admit that discouragement troubled me when we stopped in this town,” Matthew shared with Dennis as they carried in books and set up the racks. “But we prayed that the Lord would guide us to the right store, and He directed our stop here.”

“He sure did,” Dennis agreed.

Cathy stood back and admired the finished displays. “Looks great!” She turned to Brenda and gave her a quick hug. “This is such an answer to our prayers.”

Brenda smiled and patted Cathy’s shoulder. “It’s an answer to our prayers as well.”

Matthew gathered up the empty boxes. “We hope to return in several weeks to see how things are going and restock if needed.”

“We’ll look forward to seeing you,” Dennis assured him.

As the door closed behind Matthew and Brenda, the Scripture motto hanging nearby caught his eye. “In all thy ways acknowledge him . . .” Dennis read aloud.

Cathy chimed in, “And he shall direct thy paths.” The thankful couple smiled at each other—indeed God’s promise had proven true once again.

## Secret Places

In childhood tales, I loved suspense  
With vague mysterious elements,  
With secret codes and secret doors  
And secret tunnels under floors.

Today I need a secret place  
Of rendezvous with Jesus’ face.  
When I’m decoding secret pain,  
Escaping from a secret strain,  
I take my secret load of care  
Into my secret place of prayer.

– Darletta Martin



## The Boys in Cabin 5 by Elaina Eby

“Five Mennonite boys stayed in Cabin 5 Friday night,” Jackie informed me Monday morning as I whisked a mop around the tall legs of a rustic table and chairs.

“Oh?” I said in surprise as my eyebrows flew north.

“Wasn’t this the weekend you said there was a wedding at your church?” Jackie asked as she wiped under the moose figurine resting on the countertop.

“Yes . . .” I answered with a pause. “Yes, the wedding was on Saturday.”

As though an arctic blast swept through the cabin, the mop in my hands froze along with my brain. Jackie, my middle-aged boss, was the no-nonsense proprietor of Serenity Cabin Rentals, an attractive group of cabins nestled on a quiet, woody hillside. Though the two of us got along famously while we cleaned together, she didn’t suffer fools gladly.

At times, renting cabins to the public was stressful as disrespectful people left behind a wake of destruction, dirt, and dog hair. Occasionally the cabin bylaws were disregarded as renters lingered well past checkout time or avoided extra fees by smuggling in a pet or an extra guest or two. Once in a while alcohol-binging college students left their cabins ransacked. Jackie’s indignant tirades often fell on my sympathetic ears when those unwelcome guests departed.

My curiosity pined to hear Jackie’s impression of the young men. Yet knowing the haphazard ways of traveling boys, I cringed. What if they left their cabin messy with little regard to order? Or used the sparkling white bath towels to scrub their muddy church shoes? What if midnight-snack crumbs were ground into the velvet sofa cover? Or dark coffee sloshed on the floor while they raced around getting ready for the wedding? (For what group of boys without their parents are never tardy?) Did they decorate the bathroom in a blizzard of toothpaste and shaving cream? Was their trash bag overflowing with gross garbage and their sink with dirty dishes? Or, worst of all, did they spend the night hours secretly

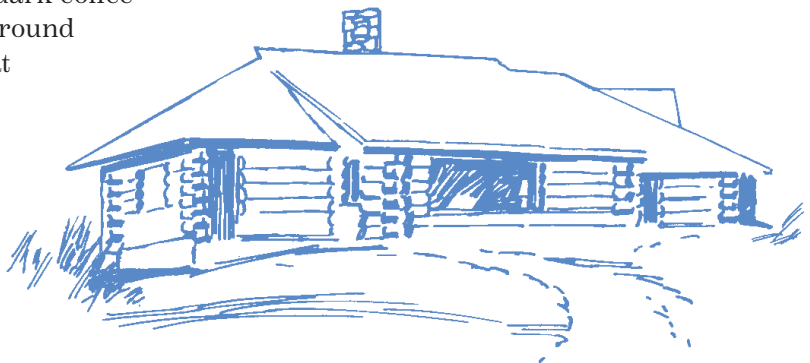
watching the large-screen television while Jackie saw the telltale glow shining through the blinds?

Jackie didn’t keep me in suspense long. “They were pretty good guests,” she continued. “The inside wasn’t too bad when they left. They did keep an extra boy that I wasn’t counting on, but when I broached them about it, they apologized and paid the additional fee.”

“Oh, great!” I quietly replied, my fear-gripped mind thawing. With a light heart, I swirled back to my mopping.

*Thank you, boys! Later I found your names signed in Cabin 5’s guest book, so now I know who you are. You likely never knew Serenity Cabin Rentals employed a Mennonite cleaning lady—one who has been trying to be a consistent witness to her boss for well over a year. You may have thought you were staying at some random lodging in the boonies, and could have done anything you pleased. But thank you for upholding your Christian example while you were short-term guests at Serenity. In one night’s visit you could have ruined the Christlike testimony that I have been trying to uphold for months. By following the rules and leaving your cabin as you found it, you cemented positive thoughts in Jackie’s mind towards God and “our people.”*

When I travel, am I continually aware of my witness? Just like the five boys, I seldom know if the strangers I happen to meet in a distant state are acquaintances to other Christians who live and work in that area. Am I leaving a consistent godly example that will enhance their view of the believers they presently rub shoulders with? Or in a chance, brief encounter, am I ripping that positive impression to shreds by a casual, lazy disregard for Biblical principles? I am so grateful the boys in Cabin 5 could be trusted!





# Companions

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## Cami by Jill Miller

In church this morning, the deacon announced Gabe and Emily’s tenth wedding anniversary. During the sermon, an uneasiness spread through me. Later, Sunday dinner didn’t even taste good.

A shadowy vignette appeared in my mind: two girls in yellow dresses standing together, and another little girl in a yellow dress standing alone. The vignette then opened into the memory of that one-year window of time years ago.

It had little to do with Gabe and Emily. It had only a little more to do with their wedding. It had a lot more to do with a little Hispanic foster girl who hadn’t attended a Mennonite wedding before theirs. And it *all* had to do with Hannah and me.

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Hannah and I did everything together. We went to school together, and we attended church together. We both gave our hearts to Jesus when we were young. Sadly, we seemed to forget the witness we were to bear for Him, the picture our lives should paint for Him.

Hannah and I were best friends in fourth grade when Camila came to church with one of the families. Her parents had separated. She could never go back to her dad, and her mom was currently in question too.

Cami first came to church in a yellow dress. Somehow, I remember that. She had a petite figure, olive skin, and dark hair. Her dark eyes darted around a lot. They sparkled when Hannah and I met her. But then they resumed their darting. I guess she was sizing everything and everyone up.

The next time we talked to her she was friendlier. She followed us as we picked snapdragons alongside the church and showed her the playground.

Soon Cami came out of her shell. One night after church, she said, “Let’s play tag.” Hannah and I didn’t know what to do. Neither of us were allowed to run after church—inside or out. But she was our new friend, and her eyes would probably stop sparkling if we said “no.”

I teetered on indecision, then Hannah spoke.

“We’re not allowed to.”

And Cami shrugged a shoulder and raised an eyebrow. “Just once?”

I caved. Eventually Hannah melted into the game too.

Tag became an after-church ritual until Cami fell and skinned her knee. I think she was wearing that same springy yellow dress. I remember a red blot on a yellow dress.

Cami had many ideas. Awhile after tag was re-outlawed, she suggested we draw pictures in our classroom after church, using class crayons and copier paper from the next room, without asking.

She had to work a bit harder to persuade us to do that. But she did.

We—Hannah and I—drew flowers and nice things. I could tell that it bothered Hannah. We had no permission to do this. I noticed that she stopped coloring and studied Cami’s picture. Cami hummed contentedly. Her paper sported a stick woman with an X on her head.

Cami looked up. “That’s Linda.”

I was horrified. Why had she drawn her caring foster mom with an X on her head?

“She doesn’t let me do anything,” Cami said. In a high-pitched voice, she continued, “ ‘Don’t say that word,’ ‘We don’t watch movies,’ blah, blah, blah.”

Hannah and I were stunned. Then Hannah stood up. She folded her picture in half and threw it away. I did the same, and we walked out of the room. We went to stand by our moms.

Then Cami came. She had our pictures with her. “Here, Melanie,” she said. “Here’s your picture.” Her eyes then sparkled at my mom.

“That’s nice, Melanie,” Mom said. “When did you draw this?” she asked as Cami walked away.

Well . . . I confessed. But not without crediting Cami for the idea. And I told her about Cami’s picture.

“Melanie, you need to be strong. You’ve been taught better than she has. You know better. You need to be a good example to Cami instead of

following her.”

“But she makes me do it,” I whined.

“No, she can’t,” Mom countered. “She doesn’t choose for you. Only you can do that.

“Melanie, if she can influence you for the bad, I think you can influence her for good.”

But I was scared. I’d seen Cami stomp away from Linda. I’d heard her grunt in defiance. What would she do to me—her equal?

As if Mom could read my mind, she continued. “Remember what God says: real love casts out fear. If you love Cami, you’ll do what’s best for her—which may not feel good for either of you. Be a true friend to her and show her what is right.”

That night I went to bed, wavering again over what I would do. School gave Hannah and me a chance to vent to each other about Cami, because Cami attended public school. And when Miss Emily wasn’t around, we *did* vent.

The next morning was no exception. Hannah had gotten into trouble too and probably received a similar admonition. She was upset. I could see it the moment she walked in the school doors.

“Why do we follow her ideas?” she hissed at me. “We know they’re wrong.”

By the end of the day, Hannah had a plan. “I’m just going to ignore her.”

That didn’t seem aboveboard either. But it seemed better than disobeying our parents. In fact, we felt almost excited to implement our plan.

Wednesday night rolled around again. Hannah and I stuck together, but Cami soon caught up with us.

“I got a tattoo.”

Hannah stared at the opposite wall.

I glanced at the glittery butterfly on Cami’s arm, but said nothing. And Hannah rolled her eyes—just like Cami did. It scared me. And Cami’s eyes went dead.

Mom’s words came back to me: *Real love casts out fear . . . Be a true friend to Cami and show her what is right.* Ignoring her wasn’t right, but was it all right if it kept me out of trouble?

Hannah caught my sleeve and said, “Let’s go.”

I followed Hannah to the church entry, where all the mailboxes were. Hannah checked her family’s box. She tore open an envelope addressed to her. She gasped. “Miss Emily gave me my own invitation!”

I looked into our mailbox to see if I’d gotten my own invitation to our teacher’s summer wedding. I had! “There’s something else in here too . . .”

“Let’s go outside,” Hannah said.

I looked up to see Cami at my shoulder. I turned and followed Hannah, past Miss Emily and her fiancé Gabe, chatting and laughing with another couple.

We emptied our envelopes beside the snapdragons. Mine contained a swatch of yellow fabric pinned to a note. I read it aloud, “Dear Melanie, would you be willing to hand out programs at our wedding? I’d like you to wear a yellow dress that matches this fabric . . .”

Hannah found the same thing in her envelope and gasped. “I get to too!”

“That’s pretty,” came a quiet voice. It was Cami. She wasn’t sassy—she was just curious.

## The Mountaintop

O Father God, the struggle’s hard,  
This burden I can’t bear.  
My faith has fallen, joy is gone,  
My heart is full of fear.  
The shadow Death makes dark the road,  
His footsteps I can hear.  
How can I journey onward when  
The valley is so drear?  
You said Your presence lights the way,  
The darkness makes it bright.  
Lord, all I see is pain and hurt,  
And fear now lights the night.  
But lift my eyes, help me to see  
The mountaintop in sight.  
Keep through Thy grace my feeble steps  
And give me strength to fight.  
But, oh, the mountaintop attained  
Is worth the self denied,  
And when I reach that mountaintop  
Rest my soul shall find.

– K. Elaine

“What’s it for?”

Hannah stuffed the papers back into her envelope.

“Miss Emily’s wedding,” I said.

Cami’s eyes lit up again. “Guess what?”

I waited. Hannah started walking away.

“Emily wants me to be her flower girl!”

Just then Linda approached Cami. “It’s time to go, Camila. Say goodbye to your friends.”

“Bye, Hannah. Bye, Melanie!” Cami smiled, but her eyes looked a little empty.

*Your friends.* I felt like a traitor.

Hannah returned to my side, snickering. “She’s never been to a Mennonite wedding. We don’t have flower girls!” She giggled and continued, “At Miss Emily’s wedding, I’m going to ask her where the flower girl is.”

Several months later, Hannah and I were sipping punch at Miss Emily and Gabe’s wedding reception. I noticed Camila a few tables away, wearing her yellow dress. It looked like it was getting too small for her. And I thought about it—she didn’t follow Hannah and me around so much anymore. Only sometimes.

I remembered something. I nudged Hannah. “Remember how Camila said she would be Miss Emily’s flower girl?”

Hannah’s face spread into a grin. “Yes!” she whispered. “When I’m done with my dessert, let’s go ask her.”

My heart started pounding as I followed Hannah. Linda wasn’t at the table. Bruce, her foster dad, was turned the other way, talking to somebody beside him.

“Hi, Cami,” Hannah said sweetly. “Where’s the flower girl?”

Cami looked confused.

I felt a surge of boldness. “You said you were going to be the flower girl.”

Hannah persisted. “Mennonites *don’t* have flower girls.”

Cami’s eyes did several things during our little conversation. At first, they sparkled, and then they flashed . . . and then they filled with tears. She buried her face as we walked away.

At that moment, the happiness of the day died in me.

Cami never talked to or followed us at all after that. And not long after, she left Bruce and Linda’s family to live with her mom again.

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I was too ashamed to tell my mom what had happened at the wedding, and the past decade had

all but washed it from my memory.

But the anniversary announcement reminded me. Hannah and I were ten years old then, and Cami was about a year younger. That made her nineteen now.

I wondered where she was now. *Does she have any worthwhile friends? Lord, what should I do? Is there any way to reach Cami now? Would she remember me? Will an apology do any good? Just for teasing her about a lie that she told?*

The truth was, the flower girl thing wasn’t all. Hannah and I had rejected Cami. Repeatedly. Deliberately.

I remembered snippets of something Mom told me the night I’d been caught coloring with Cami without permission: *You need to be strong. Be a friend and show her what is right.*

But Cami had scared me. She had manipulated, controlled, and wheedled. The only way I could do what was right was to ignore her, like Hannah had. I didn’t want to lose my best friend Hannah, either, by refusing her lead.

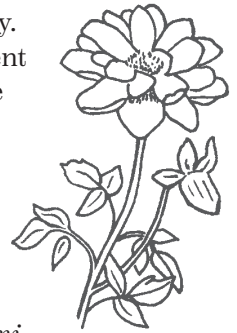
*Real love casts out fear.*

I could fight neither my conscience nor the Spirit of God. Cami wasn’t the problem. Hannah was not the problem. No. *I* had not loved Cami—not enough anyway—to stand for the right around her, and show her a better way. My heart ached at my childish act of cruelty to Cami. I had not been kind. I had not been a friend. I’d abandoned her.

And my heart bled over my act of treason toward Jesus. I had not loved *Jesus* enough to defend Him and to show His love to a love-starved, eternal soul. I feared losing Hannah’s friendship if I didn’t follow her. I had given my least concern to where I stood with Jesus.

*Lord, is there anything I can do now? I mourned. What can I do? Please forgive me! I confess and repent of allowing my fear of man to cause me to disobey You. Give me the power to walk in Your ways today—whatever You ask of me.*

I finally felt a leading that gave me peace. I couldn’t shake the conviction that I needed to connect with Cami. Even if she refused to accept my apology, that was her choice. But it was my duty to try. No, it was my choice—my choice to love. I pleaded with God to keep working in Cami—wherever she was—and picked up the phone to call Linda.





## Looking Busy vs. Being Productive

by Nathan Zook

When two men meet for the first time, a frequent initial question is, “So, what do you do?” I often like to be creative and try to think of a different first question to ask. One of my favorites is, “So, what do you do in your spare time?” This can sometimes surprise the other man.

On the occasions when I asked this question, I have gotten the impression this was the first time the other individual had been asked to discuss his leisure time. For one thing, it downplays the importance of occupation and status. For another, it pushes the individual to think about how he actually uses his time. Our existence is so much richer than what we earn.

Time is such a blessing. I heard someone recently tell young adults that they are billionaires when it comes to the number of seconds they probably have remaining in their lives. One billion seconds = approximately 31.7 years. The riches of this amount of time is astounding and yet reveals the need to not waste such a wonderful resource. Do we feel the urgency of using this time wisely? “Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time” (Colossians 4:5).

Our occupations should be productive with the goal of honoring our employers and churning out quality products. Yet, many people have flexibility even in their employment. For those working hourly in an office, much time can be spent checking emails or gossiping with coworkers in the next cubicle. Those working with their hands may also find that they become susceptible to wasting time in gossip. Both work time and leisure time present the opportunity to waste many seconds if not years of our lives. I have also found that leisure time, when spent with others, can be far more valuable than official work time.

We are wealthy with time. Squandering those seconds seems to be the default option. Actually making productive use of that time takes effort. Starting an uplifting conversation when waiting in line can be so much richer and rewarding than staring vacantly at passersby or checking online for the latest news that will probably not better our existence. Choosing good reading material or filling our minds with appropriate music can make our commutes much richer. Anyone can look busy, but it takes active planning and discipline to be productive in building the church, representing the kingdom, and redeeming the time.

## Tabletop Trouble by Anita H. Martin

The new industrial sewing machine arrived with its own table. We tore open the cardboard box and slid out the tabletop. Dismayed, we gaped. Rough unstained wood! Yes, there were the rest of the pieces, ready to be assembled. But an unfinished top! How disappointing.

“Well, I guess we can sand it and varnish it,” one ventured.

“I was hoping to get it set up today,” came the small voice of someone else.

“I just can’t believe this. Why would they sell the tops unfinished?” a third put in. “This is ridiculous.”

We gazed at the cardboard and Styrofoam mess on the floor, contemplating our dilemma. What should we do now?

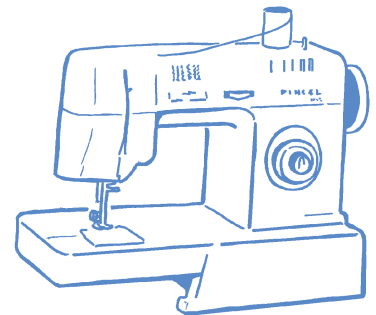
Suddenly, someone had an inspiration. He reached down and lifted the top out of the styrofoam

bed. Looking underneath, he triumphantly pulled it up for the rest of us to see. As one we bent to look at the bottom. First we stared. Then we cheered.

A beautiful smooth white top with measurements printed onto the surface!

The comments started to fly. “Well, I guess we were a bit quick to judge.” “Yes, we didn’t know all the facts.” “I never even thought of looking at the other side!” “This is teaching me something.”

And then came the clincher: “Always remember, there are two sides to every tabletop and at least two sides to every story!”







## Plopped to Plant by Carolyn Gingrich

A question was asked in the ladies' Sunday school class. How would you encourage a mother consumed with bitterness because she just found out that her unborn baby will probably die within the first year of life? She is questioning what the purpose is for such a short life. How could a good God allow this?

There were many truths from God's Word shared in the Sunday school class that day. Depending on personality, the question and situation would be handled a bit differently. I wanted to share my personal story and return the question, if my daughter had died within the first weeks of her life, would her life have had value in God's kingdom? Would her life have left an impact?

My third child, a beautiful girl, was born full-term. But due to serious medical issues, we were transferred to another hospital an hour away. This hospital was in the city of Orillia, Ontario, a town with a very old hospital building, but the hospital specialized in acute care for newborns referred to as NICU (neonatal intensive care unit).

The NICU felt like a closet filled with incubators. A few old wooden rocking chairs were the only places for mothers to sit. There was a small bedroom at the end of a hall for mothers to stay in if their baby was in the NICU. This bedroom had two single beds, two chairs, and a tiny half bath. A shower for mothers was located down another hall. The bedroom was the only option for me to stay in because the hospital was unable to accommodate me as a patient.

I shared the bedroom with Shelley, who was trying to pass a forty-eight-hour baby care test so she could take her baby home. This "test" required her to show up in the NICU unit to feed her baby every three hours over a forty-eight-hour time frame. If she did not come, the nurses would feed her baby and she would fail, then another forty-eight hours of baby care would be required. She had kept failing and was now on day eight.

I did not like sharing a room with her. Shelley did not bathe or change her clothes regularly. Her eyes were glazed and crossed, revealing possible signs

of brain damage due to drug use. I did not feel safe around her boyfriend who had similar symptoms of drug use. Soon after we arrived, with our daughter barely stabilized, Shelley informed my husband Brent about the hospital rule that husbands could sleep in the chairs in the bedrooms if the other mother didn't mind. But she did mind. So, therefore, he could not stay. Brent found her manner irksome as well as her horrible sense of timing.

Brent drove the hour home every night and returned the next morning. We held our daughter as much we could. Then jaundice set in, and we needed to hold her wrapped in a blue-light blanket, all the while watching out for her heart monitor cords and IV tubes.

Exhausted, Brent left for home earlier one evening. It seemed that Shelley and her boyfriend spied on his comings and goings, and they knew when my protector was gone. Shelley and her boyfriend were bolder, and she had asked me if I was okay with her boyfriend being in our room. I gave her a direct "no!"

That evening I had fed my baby girl and had settled in my bed until the next feeding. Shelley's boyfriend was lurking outside the door of the bedroom. Shelley was coming back and forth from the NICU. The bedroom door could not be locked.

I always slept fully clothed and wore a soft vest with zipper pockets where I kept my money and identification. (The hospital did not supply my food or drinking water.) I grew panicky, too afraid to sleep. I turned my back to the wall so I would be facing the door. I pushed my blanket strategically so it only half covered me and I couldn't be pinned underneath it.

The boyfriend's footsteps softly shuffled outside the door. *Help me, Lord*, I prayed over and over.

To my great relief, I heard the firm tone of a NICU nurse in the hall informing Shelley's boyfriend that visiting hours were long over and he needed to go. Shelley came into the room and noisily moved about.

Shelley had the practice of setting an alarm clock for the night feedings and then pressing

snooze several times before getting up to feed her baby. At first, I could tolerate this practice because my daughter's feeding schedule was similar to her baby's schedule, but then I started feeding my daughter more often due to the jaundice, and our babies' feeding rhythms became different. Sometimes her alarm would start going off after I had been back in bed only ten to fifteen minutes.

On this particular night, when her alarm went off and she pressed snooze, something inside of me was close to snapping. I took my pillows and a blanket and went to the NICU to be as close to my baby girl as I could be. Oh, how I wished I could be at home!

## Your Mission

You have a quiet place to fill  
That none else can, or ever will.  
God fashioned it with utmost care  
To be a blessing everywhere.  
May crumbs that drop off from your board  
Encourage others in the Lord.  
A quiet place. Yea, from your bed  
Come lyrics that souls may be fed.  
And earnest intercessions rise  
From your still corner. No surprise;  
For loved ones weigh upon your heart  
That circumstances keep apart.  
Secluded, yes. And lonely, some.  
But comforted by the Great One  
Who never by mistakes contrives  
The plan best suited for all lives.  
And grace lifts to a nobler height;  
You find fulfillment in your plight.  
From limitations God can shape  
Great blessings, for His own name's sake.  
Those hidden quite behind life's scenes  
Can be His humble unknown means  
Of great support. Those on the go  
Will likely never even know.  
No matter; God's will has been done.  
Take heart! Be faithful, feeble one!

— A. Eberly

No other parent was there. Two babies had been discharged. I took two wooden rockers—one for my feet—and comfortably placed my pillows. Tucking my blanket under my chin, I watched my baby girl, now under two blue lights. I fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke, my daughter was needing to be fed. Shelley was watching me from where she sat feeding her baby. A new baby girl had arrived. She looked full-term and healthy, and she had no IV or heart monitors. Why was she in the NICU?

A young woman walked into the NICU, glanced around, and then picked up the new baby girl. I struck up a conversation with her and found out her name was Abby and her baby girl's name was Colette. The doctor entered the room, and Abby immediately asked, "Was Child Services called?"

"Let's talk back here," the doctor answered. Abby laid Colette carefully back inside the crib and followed the doctor. I overheard, "Your baby tested positive for marijuana." Fifteen minutes later, Abby left the NICU without even glancing at Colette.

Brent arrived with food and the comforting support that only a spouse can provide. That day (and the days following, until our daughter was discharged), we became like fish in a fishbowl. Abby came back into the NICU and looked at Colette. She looked at us, and then pulled up a rocking chair and held Colette. Shelley positioned her chair so she could watch us, and she held her baby for a while after she had fed him. Her boyfriend came also and eyed Brent.

Brent and I sat tightly next to the incubator, every once in a while reaching inside to rub our daughter's back or tummy. I could hold her only while I fed her. Then Brent would hug her and place her back in the incubator under two blue lights.

The day our daughter was to be discharged, I had opportunity to pray with Abby. She had had two babies before Colette, both boys who were roughly the ages of my sons at home. Both her boys had been adopted. I was able to take our daughter home. Abby would have her daughter taken from her that same day and would see her only at supervised visits. I never saw Abby and Colette or Shelley again, but I would pray for them often.

Approximately two months later, we were again in the Orillia hospital due to a medical emergency with

our daughter. We needed to be transferred by ambulance from that hospital to a hospital in Toronto. The nurse who accompanied us on the ambulance had worked in the NICU when our daughter was there. I asked her many questions about Abby and Shelley, and she wasn't allowed to tell me much, but she did say that Shelley eventually took her baby boy home because an older woman was going to help her take care of the baby. The nurses advocated for Abby with Child Services, telling them of her attentive care for Colette. Abby did have Colette taken from her for a few weeks, but then Colette was given back to her.

One of the babies that was discharged belonged to a couple from my hometown of Parry Sound. The mother and I have seen each other in town from time to time, and recently we chatted over a cup of coffee. She has attended my church a few times.

So, does a short life have value? Can it leave an

## Pardoned but Unpardoning

Matthew 18:15 says that if we see a fault in someone, we are supposed to go to him alone and tell him about it. What do we do before we tell him about it? Do we gossip to some others about how bad this person is? Eventually what we have done will come back to that person, and it leaves us with a bad reputation.

In verse 21 Peter came to Jesus and asked Him how many times he must forgive. Jesus answered in verse 22 by saying that he must forgive seventy times seven. That is a lot of forgiving. Jesus didn't mean that once we forgive someone 490 times, we can stop forgiving him. If we are worried how many times we must forgive someone, we aren't forgiving with the right attitude, and we need to change.

Verses 23-25 tell us about the servant that was pardoned but wouldn't pardon. The story starts out with a king wanting to settle accounts with his servants. There was one servant who owed the king 10,000 talents, which in today's money would likely be well over one million dollars. After the king took account of his servants, he called for the servant who owed him that sum and commanded him to sell all that he had until he could pay the debt. In today's world if we were to sell everything we have, that would include cars, houses, and farms. That may seem like a lot to lose, but this servant was supposed to sell his wife and his children too!

In verse 26 the servant pled with his master

impact? These interactions that we had with Shelley, Abby, and others in the NICU—were they trivial or did they hold eternal significance? We definitely wouldn't have chosen that location or method to give parenting lessons or share our faith! Did they all understand that our strength came from a relationship with Christ?

Sometimes it may feel that God just plops Christian somewhere like He did with us in that hospital's NICU. *Here! Plop! Trust Me! Plant some seeds! Let your light shine!* Our Lord is true to His promise to never leave us nor forsake us. He also promised that in this world we will have trouble, but that He would overcome the world. Even the glow of one candle's dim, flickering light can dispel much darkness. Christians are called to be lights in the world. Where does God want us to glow? We don't know the eternal impact that our candle's light may leave. So, when plopped, *plant!*

by Jayden Shenenberger

to forgive the debt, and the king was moved with compassion and forgave him the unpayable debt. While walking down the road, he met one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 pence, which is equivalent to \$1,500. The servant, forgetting that he was just forgiven an unpayable debt, grabbed his fellow servant by the throat and demanded that he pay everything. The fellow servant fell down at his feet, asking for more time and he would pay everything. But the servant refused and cast him into prison. The other fellow servants, seeing what happened, told their lord. This made their lord angry, and he called for the forgiven servant. The lord then called the servant wicked and delivered him to the tormentors until he could pay all that he owed. So it is in verse 35 if we don't forgive others from our heart, the Lord won't forgive us.

Here are some questions we should ask ourselves when forgiving or being forgiven: What do I do when I see a fault in a person? With what attitude am I forgiving? When I am forgiven, do I forgive the next person that trespasses against me? Am I willing to give up all I have in order to be forgiven?

How often do we refuse to forgive the person who trespasses against us? Let us strive to be more Christlike in forgiveness. After all, He died on the cross so we could be forgiven from our sins. He doesn't demand anything from us—Jesus just wants us to surrender our whole lives to Him and forgive.



## God's Wonder—the Bats by Brenda McDowell

“And to the bats; to go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the tops of the ragged rocks” (Isaiah 2:20, 21).

With a group of young people, we ventured with flashlights to explore a vacated mining shaft. Before long we were surprised to find occupants in the rocks overhead. The tops and sides of the gouged-out holes were lined with bats, clinging to the rough surfaces. The bats were sleeping while it was daylight outside.

Those of us who could, kept flashlights shining upward as much as possible, so we could see overhead. Some of us were afraid bats would swoop down on us. We wondered what value bats could possibly have.

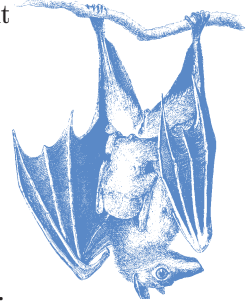
On a similar excursion, a young man was going to kill a bat but noticed a band around its leg. Instead of killing the creature, he decided to remove the band to read it. To his surprise and to those of us watching, the address revealed the great distance the bat had traveled.

The young man sent the band to the address on it. He received a reply that those who had banded the bat had never known a bat to travel so far north.

What has God wrought when He created the bat?

Why would scientists even want to band bats and study them?

I recently read an article about bats that impressed me with the majesty of God. A large cave on a farm sheltered a huge colony of gray bats. The farmer wondered if the bats were even good to have around.



A zoologist got the farmer's permission to explore the cave and made an interesting and valuable find. The walls of the cave were, of course, lined with bats and their young. On the ground below them lay wings of various insects. The zoologist recognized the wings of potato beetles and other harmful insects. The farmer then realized the value of bats in saving his potato crop from damage.

Bats also eat mosquitoes and cucumber beetles among other harmful species of insects. Long-nosed bats devour cockroaches, flying ants, grasshoppers, and moths. Some farmers have relied on bats and not needed insecticides to protect their crops.

Bats also disperse seeds and are pollinators.

How little I knew when I saw my first bat! My appreciation has surged for another of God's creatures. Why should the wonders God hath wrought be lost in silence and forgot? How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out.

## Because of Who He Is by V. Weaver

Sitting at the sales window of our homemade ice cream stand, I stared absently at the crowds of people milling around the park grounds. It was getting late in the afternoon, and no one was paying us much attention. Suddenly a man appeared from around the corner and approached without hesitation.

“Hand me a \$20 bill.” That's all he said. No explanation!

My response was also without hesitation. Without a second thought, I handed him the money. I didn't need an explanation because of who he was. He was my father.

After he disappeared, as suddenly as he had come, the request still unexplained, I was left to reflect. There wasn't a single other man around who would have gotten the same unhesitating compliance. I didn't need to know what he was doing

because he was my father and the money belonged to him anyway.

Sometimes God makes unexpected requests too. Suddenly, unexplained, He says, “Give up your plans for next year.” Or maybe He says, “Give to me this budding relationship,” or “Give me your time Sunday afternoon.”

Sometimes the request is easy to understand. Taking God's way turns out so much better than mine would have, and I'm glad to let Him have it.

Sometimes it doesn't make any sense at all. But what does it matter if I understand it or not? It all belongs to Him anyway. “My” resources are His, the work is His work, and I belong to Him. I gave myself and all my talents, plans, longings, dreams, and abilities to Him long ago, so what right have I to withhold anything? I don't even need an explanation. After all, He is my Father!



## What Is Christmas? by Delphine Dueck

### *A true account*

*What is Christmas?* she sits thinking. Her memory scrolls over Christmas seasons gone by. Singing carols outside neighbors' front doors in a snow globe world of big snowflakes. Waking up to a Michigan six-inch layer of fresh snow gracing the front deck, perfectly frosting evergreen boughs. Surrounded with family, lots of it, little sisters to sip hot chocolate with and bigger siblings to play games with. Gathered in the living room, singing "Glory be to God, glory be to God" and trying to reach those high notes of the old carol. After the attempt, listening to Dad's memories of singing that very song with Grammy, the strong soprano. Oh, and somewhere in the middle of all those cozy memories—at the center, she thinks—is the wonderful Christmas story. The idyllic picture complete with manger-baby Saviour, snow-capped trees—maybe not for real, but why not embellish? Brand-new parents, diamond-gold star, dazzling angels, wondering shepherds, and adoring wise men. Really, her version of the Christmas story is kind of romantic.

If that is Christmas, then she isn't having Christmas this year. Hot tears stream down her cheeks, and the words leave her mouth in a sob. "This is not Christmas." She knows something feels off-key, but her mind argues fiercely that she is right. She'll skip all the family, cozy living room carols, hot drinks with chocolate-eyed sisters, and beautiful snow if she must, but this . . . this is too hard. It's not Christmasy at all. In fact, it is snuffing out the very life of any "holiday spirit."

She just found out there's to be a service at church on Christmas Day. That, in itself, wouldn't send her for a twirl, even though she wasn't used to church on Christmas morning. But she knows it will be a meager gathering at best, with over half the church gone for the holidays. And God knows her feelings about meager gatherings in church houses. The tiny church group that she and her new husband are part of has been hard for her sociable soul ever since she got married. So she

can hardly bear the thought of a Christmas service with a huddle of holiday leftovers, mere handfuls of people scattered over the auditorium trying to sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful."

*Sniffle, sniff.* Doesn't God know what Christmas is about? He sure should. She is already giving up being with her family for Christmas. Couldn't God just smooth out this Christmas so she could still have Christmas? Wadded tissues fill her fist, and she stares across the room with glistening eyes. Her pedestal under Christmas shakes, then collapses. She comes face-to-face with a question she never really considered before. *What is Christmas about?* When all the family gatherings, loaded tables, six-inch snowfalls, and church houses full of people "home for Christmas" are stripped from Christmas, then what? Even the Christmas story doesn't look very romantic anymore.

This question demands an answer in light of her current dilemma. It becomes a thirst, an urgent need to be filled. She must know what Christmas is really about. She opens her Bible to Matthew, finds the story of Jesus' birth, reads it like she's never read it before.

What did Christmas mean to Jesus? This Saviour-baby left gold streets for cobbled alleys, a white throne for a rugged manger, royal ease for raw humanity, pure adoration for pure scorn. His arrival was in crude, very unromantic surroundings, and He was on the "Most Wanted" list shortly after He came. No decked halls, adoring crowds, or pile of presents awaited him. He came, knowing His purpose was to die for the drunkard passed out on Christmas Eve, the masses of frantic holiday shoppers adoring Santa, and the girl curled up in the armchair crying selfish tears.

How about Joseph? Joseph gave up his lawful right to kindly divorce his expectant bride-to-be, choosing instead to marry her. And since he didn't "put her away," he was partaker with the shame, the heated scorn, the outright ridicule, and the scandalous

gossip that goes with such a delicate situation. Who would believe him now if he says it's not his child? Scrap romantic notions. This looks hard.

She tries to imagine herself in Mary's shoes. Mary wasn't a glorified person at the time of Jesus' birth. She was someone the local gossips whispered about. Was she snubbed for being willing to be the mother of the Lord? When she confided her holy secret to her precious husband-to-be, even that relationship started shaking. Did she spend nights in tears, pleading with God to please, please not let Joseph divorce her, to make him understand? And then when her time came to bring the Son of God into this world, her delivery room was a dark stable, her bed was musty hay. There's not even a frilly bassinet to lay the world's most precious baby in. Her mom didn't bustle in with steaming, comforting chicken noodle soup, plump her pillows, *ooh* and *aah* over this grandchild. Instead, rough shepherds peeked in through the doorway, wanting to see her

## The Shepherds by Thelma Martin

I wonder why God chose shepherds to be the first to hear of the birth of Jesus. Why not tell the religious leaders? Wouldn't it seem like they would wish to be first to hear the announcement? As I ponder the shepherds, I am impressed by their godly example.

They likely knew a promised Messiah was coming. It had been prophesied for centuries. They kept busy anyway, reminding me of Jesus' words, "Occupy till I come." Wherever the Lord has a worktable for me, I must keep my hands calloused. No matter how trifling my job seems, I need to do it willingly, simply because it is His work.

When angels unexpectedly filled the night sky, the shepherds' hearts thumped rapidly and their hands trembled. Whatever was happening? They were reassured by the angel that danger was not imminent. "Fear not," were the angels' words. I also need to be encouraged and peaceful when heavenly messages penetrate my spirit.

The shepherds kept watch through the night for predators. So, also, I need to persevere in the dark times of my life. In sickness or sorrow, moment by moment, I must trust God that the sun will rise

baby, invading her privacy (at least if Mary was selfishly minded).

The longer she reads and thinks, the clearer truth dawns. It's like she is finding the blocks to rebuild Christmas. Could it be that Christmas is really about sacrifice? Sacrifice is the common thread in the real lives of the nativity-scene characters. Sacrificing themselves to fulfill God's will even if it wasn't easy. So, if Christmas is about giving up ourselves to willingly be where God calls us, to joyfully do what He wants us to do, then she doesn't actually need a full church house ringing with "O Come, All Ye Faithful" to have Christmas. It still doesn't look easy, but she can face Christmas again because she knows she will have Christmas. She even suspects it could be the most real, most Christmasy Christmas she has ever had. And maybe, with the true Christmas spirit alive in her heart, the church house will ring with the sweet, swelling strains of "O come let us adore Him" after all!

again, and always be on guard to slay any transgression that might stalk me in the nighttime.

The shepherds didn't just comment, "That is great news." They hastened to find the newborn and worship Him. I should be just as prompt to pause in my housework and take some moments to worship God and be a testimony for Him. The shepherds glorified and praised God after they saw Baby Jesus. Words of thanksgiving and praise for my blessings (even through difficult seasons) should daily hail from my heart and lips.

I don't know whether sheep-tending was a coveted job in Bible times, or if shepherds were on a low rung in society. I just know God remembered them on the night shift. God unfailingly thinks of each of His own, all the time. It isn't important to Him who they are or what their work is. He wants each person to know the story of the Saviour.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them (Luke 2:20).

## The True Meaning of Christmas by Ida Mae Byler

It is December twenty-third, and I am remembering today, four years ago. We were gathered around the bedside of my mother-in-law, awaiting her homegoing. It had been a very long month, with Mom suffering intensely. Now it was apparent her time on earth was limited. We were exhausted. It was so hard to watch her decline.

Shortly before bedtime, Mom's spirit went to be with Jesus. While we rejoiced to know she was free from suffering, we were sad. I thought briefly about the timing being all wrong. Christmas should be joyful, and for Mom it would be. But we, who were left behind, had heavy hearts.

Christmas Day dawned cloudy and cold. I distinctly remember sitting at the dining room table, gazing out the window, thinking about how the weather matched our hearts. I had no idea where the strength was going to come from to continue caring for my father-in-law and Mom's oldest brother, who had been living with them. I was worn-out, and there was still much to do to get ready for the funeral and for out-of-state family members who were coming. Our place was in a state of neglect. We had not been able to keep up with caregiving, work, and family life.

All I wanted to do was to crawl back into bed and sleep for days. Tears ran down my cheeks, dripping into my coffee. *How can this be Christmas?*

But suddenly I was straining my eyes. What was

I seeing? Through the steamy windows, I saw shadows moving across our lawn. "Someone's here!" I announced.

My family streamed to the windows. The Sommers' family van was parked in the driveway and their family was scattered across our property, picking up accumulated trash from little people's play, raking leaves, and hauling off broken tree limbs from recent storms. In a very short time, they had our place looking more presentable. With a quiet, "God bless you," they left as quickly as they had come.

Even now my eyes mist, as I ponder the gift we were given that Christmas morning, all wrapped up with the love of Jesus. Our weary souls lost some of the heaviness, knowing that someone remembered us.

It was no light gift. The oldest Sommers daughter was to be married January 5, and they were in the middle of wedding preparations. Yet they dropped all and came to bless our family.

Is this then the wonder of Christmas? That in celebrating the greatest Gift the world ever received, we share a part of that miracle by being the hands and feet of Jesus? As we bring His love and shine Christ's light of hope into the world around us in practical ways, we fulfill the true meaning of Christmas.

## Every by Carolyn Gingrich

The first heavy snowfall fell softly throughout the night. We awoke to a pure-white, fluffy blanket layering every single thing in sight. Every twig, every pine needle, and every lingering brown oak leaf bore a tall layer of snow. On the lake, our place for a skating rink was no longer visible due to the thick snow. The significance of each individual twig, branch, pine needle, or leaf was magnified by the thick flaky covering of the snow, and because each and every object was involved, a complete white screen of encasement formed around our house like a wintery hug.

Sometimes in a church, an individual may feel like he is just a tiny twig or perhaps an old brown and brittle oak leaf. "Why bother getting involved? I'm not able to do much. There are so many others that are far more capable than I am."

The word *every* can be defined as all the individual members of a set, without exception. In Nehemiah 4:6, everyone was helping build the wall, "for the people had a mind to work."

Not everyone's part was mentioned. Who packed and delivered the lunches? What happened with the laundry? Drinking water for sweaty construction workers—someone hauled a lot.

In a church, are the ones who quietly pray for the work of the Lord less valuable than the ones who physically hold the shovel?

If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members, every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him (1 Corinthians 12:17, 18).



## Emmanuel by Anita Yoder

When I sing the lovely old carols of Jesus' birth, I thrill to hear the words describing Jesus: the Wonderful Counselor, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. But the name I love the

most is *Emmanuel: God with us*.

Think of the wonder of it. *God with us*. How many people down through the centuries have agonized because their god was far away?

I remember the story of the day when Elijah met with Baal's worshippers. Think of their frenzied frustration as their throats got hoarse from screaming for Baal to answer. Was he traveling or napping? He was obviously unaware of their desperation. I need a God who answers when I merely whisper His name. I need a God who would never be caught napping. Elijah's God was with him and instantly answered his prayer.

Thousands of years later when Paul preached on Mars' Hill, he appealed to people's search for the true God with the same line of thought: God is not far from each one of us! How the hearts of the audience must have warmed at those assuring words. They had never known if their "unknown god" even knew about them.

*God with us*. The words have soothed and comforted people through all of history, including me.

I told a friend of my recent storm of confusion, betrayed trust, and debilitating emotional pain. As I moaned on and on to her, she asked gently, "Where do you think *God* was when that person hurt you?" I stopped short. To think that God was *with* me in that pain somehow made it all seem less hurtful and more purposeful. *God with us*.

During the same period of darkness, another friend sent me a beautiful card with only four simple words inside: "You are never alone." That

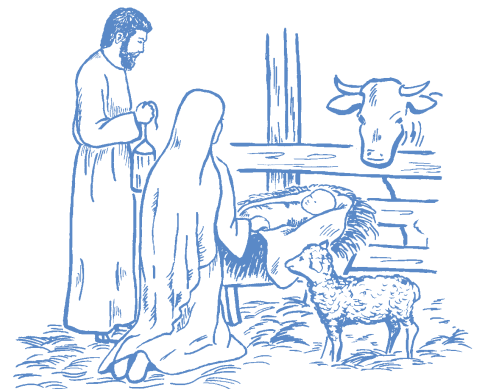
took me to God's promise in Hebrews 13:5: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." I'm told that in the original Greek, two double negatives here emphasize "never." That would hardly pass in proper English grammar, but one songwriter portrays the thought beautifully, using five negatives:

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,  
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all Hell should endeavor to  
shake,  
I'll *never, no never, no never* forsake.

God is just as persistent throughout the rest of the Bible, telling me repeatedly that He is nearby. Even when Jesus commanded His disciples to go into all the world to preach, He ended with, "I am with you always." He did not promise that they'd be free from hurts or tears. But He promised He would never leave them, and we know there is nothing more certain than Jesus' word. *God with us*. Even in storms, even in darkness.

It's Christmastime now, and I'm caroling with friends outside in the cold. The songs thrill me again with their exultant words. Then I wonder . . . what if the Wonderful Counselor stayed far away? If the Prince of Peace kept a safe distance? What about an aloof Everlasting Father? *God with us* makes all the difference, spanning the distance between the finite and the infinite, between the needy and the all-sufficient.

Emmanuel—God with us—shows me a part of God's character that exudes intimacy and love. It's as if He's so anxious for my love that He won't stay away! The humbling reality of it awes me. The words warm my heart as our frosty breaths wisp above our heads. The carols ring out: Jesus is born—God is with us!



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Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

—Matthew 1:22, 23

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## My Friend Jenna by E. Sauder

Jenna was special.

I met her when I was about fifteen and she was thirteen. This happened one day during Christmas vacation when we happened to be skating at the same place. We went to different churches, but we knew many of the same people. Jenna was chatty, and so was I. It didn't take long for us to get to know each other fairly well.

Jenna lived in the same small town as I did, just on the other side of it. "You know that big, new house they're building?" she asked. "That's ours." She wasn't bragging; she was just telling me how it was.

Jenna hopped from subject to subject like a grasshopper. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?" she asked.

"I have three brothers," I told her with a grin.

"Oh, wow, that's so many!" she exclaimed. "What about your sisters?"

"I have no sisters," I told her, watching for her reaction. She did not disappoint me.

"That's sad!" she said first, looking genuinely sorry for me. Then she brightened. "But guess what. I don't have any sisters either. I just have one brother."

"Did he come skating with you?" I asked her.

She nodded. "See, he's right there." I saw who she meant. But Jenna had more questions. "Did your brothers come along too?"

"Just one," I said. "He's actually right over there, talking to your brother."

"Wow, he's tall!" Jenna exclaimed. "He must be older than you."

"Shall I tell you a secret?" I asked, eyes dancing. "He's actually younger than I am!"

Jenna stopped skating so she could look at me. "But he's taller than you!" she exclaimed. "Why is he taller than you if he's younger than you?"

I smiled and explained to her that when I had stopped growing, my younger brother had just started growing, and it didn't look like he was going to stop anytime soon.

Jenna chatted to me about their new house and

their old vehicle and her favorite kitten and her least favorite subject in school until her mother was ready to take her home.

"Bye, Jenna!" I called from the edge of the rink as she left.

"Bye, Stacey!" she replied. "I hope I see you again sometime!"

"I hope so too," I said, meaning it.

I saw Jenna several times in the next few years. She always greeted me by name, smiling like I was her favorite person. We hadn't really had a chance to chat for very long until we ended up at the same church service one Sunday evening.

It was one of those days that hovers between spring and winter; a day when the snowdrifts can't decide whether they should completely melt or not, and a few brave birds sing lonesome songs.

I dodged mud puddles as I walked toward the church. The parking lot was filled to the edges with vehicles of every size and description. I yanked open one of the double glass doors of the church and smiled as I saw people spilling from the entrance into the foyer. Have I mentioned that I am definitely a people person?

I had barely walked across the foyer before I was almost bowled over by an enthusiastic hug and someone squealing, "Stacey! It's so good to see you again!"

"Jenna!" I said, genuinely surprised. "I didn't think I would see you here!"

She was nearly hopping up and down in excitement, despite her thirteen years. "Yeah, and look, Corissa's here too, and Mom said I can sit with you girls!"

I tried to process all this as I took off my coat and greeted a few other friends. Jenna had so much energy; sometimes I could barely keep up with her.

We girls eventually filed into the church, and Jenna gleefully pranced up the aisle ahead of me. I just smiled to myself.

We sat down in a long row on the bench and quietly waited for the service to begin. Well, most

of us waited quietly. Jenna, on the other hand, was full of questions.

“Did you come by yourself?” she asked me, whispering, but not quietly.

I nodded, hoping that by not replying, Jenna would catch on that we should be quiet.

She didn’t.

“Do you know lots of people here?”

“Quite a few,” I replied.

“Why isn’t your brother here?” she asked, after a moment.

“He wasn’t feeling well,” I said.

“Oh.” Jenna was silent now for a few minutes.

The service opened, and the song leader announced the first song. “Let’s stand to sing this song,” he said.

We all stood, and I pulled a songbook out of the rack. I had just found the correct song when I heard another book thump onto the bench—Jenna’s songbook. Jenna was nowhere to be seen. I looked at my friend Corissa who had been sitting on the other side of Jenna and raised my eyebrows. She shrugged. Who could tell what Jenna was up to?

We had sung three songs, and the devotional was halfway done before Jenna reappeared and plunked herself between Corissa and me.

Now she turned to Corissa. “Do you have a piece of paper?” she whispered. “I forgot my notebook.”

Corissa obligingly tore out a page of her notebook and gave it to Jenna. Jenna looked at Corissa, then at me. “I need a pen too,” she added.

Corissa softly told Jenna that she had only one pen, and so did I. Jenna was not easily deterred.

She leaned around me to my other friend Janessa. “Do you have a pen?” she asked.

Janessa did, and Jenna was very happy until the main part of the service began.

Janessa, understandably, wanted her pen to take notes during the sermon. Jenna gave it back and sat with her head on my shoulder.

“Stacey!” she whispered suddenly, urgently.

I smiled at her and raised my eyebrows in a silent “What do you need?”

“Those two girls beside you,” she went on, not particularly loud but not exactly quietly either, “are they twins?”

I stifled a giggle in spite of myself. Janessa and Sierra could certainly pass for twins! I shook my head. “Just sisters,” I replied.

I thought I had trouble sitting still, but Jenna took squirming to a whole new level. First, she turned around to see whose baby was crying. She leaned over my lap to see which dad was taking another baby out. Next, she laid her head on my shoulder, stopping only briefly to ask, “Do you mind if I do this?”

“If you’re so tired that you need to put your head on my shoulder and sleep, then, no, I don’t mind,” I told her, attempting to take notes at the same time.

Jenna smiled at me. I was her favorite person at the moment, apparently. She grabbed my left hand, the one not busy writing, and examined it like a matron at an orphanage. It just so happened to be the hand that held the finger I had gouged at work a few days prior. Jenna shook her head and eluded softly. “Ouch!” she said, still whispering.

“You should be more careful!”

I had to agree with her.

Having inspected my hand, Jenna turned to my shoes. Her eyes got big. “How come your shoes are so clean?” she asked, comparing them to her own ankle boots, which were caked in mud.

I shrugged, deciding to wait until after church to tell her that I had stopped in the bathroom before the service to clean my shoes. I also chose to ignore the fact that those same ankle boots had deposited some of their load onto my solid-colored dress. *Dresses, I’m thankful, are washable*, I told myself.

## Psalm 131

That which I thought I needed has been taken away.

What I couldn’t imagine, now has come.

Thrust in a whirl of numbness I stagger and sway,

Blinded by hunger pangs, I am deaf and dumb.

Slowly, by small degrees, I taste life again;

There are no answers needed where I am, till,

Choosing to hope in my Lord who is such a Friend!

Quieted by His love, I can trust Him still.

—Lucy Gehman



Thinking  
with the  
**EDITOR**

## No Less a Miracle

by Roger L. Berry

As we have again contemplated the birth of Christ, we think of the great miracles associated with that event. The Virgin

Birth, the guiding star, and the angelic messengers were miraculous and supernatural evidences that God had indeed reached down to earth to redeem sinful mankind.

As we marvel at the birth of Christ, let us not forget the other miracles, events we may not consider as miraculous as those named above. It was a miracle that world events had culminated in such a way that a government taxation would bring Joseph back to his hometown at the exact time Christ was to be born. This brings up the miracle of the fulfillment of prophecies surrounding the Christ. The exact town of His birth had been prophesied hundreds of years before. The likelihood that even two or three of the prophecies concerning the Messiah would have been fulfilled by chance is small indeed. But with dozens of prophecies about one man coming to fulfillment at one point in history, the statistical probability of such becomes astronomical. Of course, we are not dealing here with statistical improbabilities but with divine realities.

Are we awestruck as we think of these miracles? They should impress us that God is a God of miracles. As one song says, "God specializes in things thought impossible."

Perhaps you have waited around for some dramatic occurrence such as a booming voice or a blinding light? Has your faith ever lagged because you have not experienced such? Have you stopped to ponder the "little" miracles that may go unnoticed by many? They are no less miraculous than the dramatic.

Perhaps you have prayed and God has worked the situation out in just the right way. Perhaps the Spirit has prompted you to stop or do a certain thing, and later it becomes obvious that, had you not listened to the inner promptings, you would have suffered greatly. Did you recover from an accident or illness that caused the doctors to marvel? Did you give God more praise than the doctors or the medicine?

While we ponder the everyday miracles that are no less than the spectacular, let us not forget the miracle of transformation that took place when we repented and turned to the Lord. Has that miracle taken place in your life? It is no less a miracle than the events we have been commemorating this past week.

Then may we hope, the angelic hosts among;  
To sing, redeemed, a glad triumphal song.

He that was born upon this joyful day  
Around us all His glory shall display;  
Saved by His love, forever we shall sing  
Eternal praise to Heav'n's almighty King.

— John Byron

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### My Friend Jenna, cont.

The service ended, and Jenna bounced off to chat with other friends. I watched her handing out hugs and cuddling babies. She seemed to know every child under the age of five by name.

Before she left, Jenna came to find me. She hugged me so hard I could barely breathe. "I'm so glad I got to see you, Stacey!" she exclaimed. "We should hang out sometime!"

Jenna was always full of big plans. "That would be fun," I agreed. "I'm sure we'll see each other around town too."

"Oh, I hope so!" Jenna's eyes sparkled at the prospect. "Bye, Stacey."

"Bye, Jenna," I called. She was off before I finished speaking.

Some people might think Jenna is a little

strange. A lot of people might find that she taxes their patience. I can see why they think that. But we all love Jenna. She shows us that loving others unabashedly is possible. She sings with all her heart, even if some of the notes aren't quite right. She teaches us that being everyone's friend is so worthwhile. She inspires us with her contagious energy and her interest in others. When we look at Jenna, we see a lovely girl being exactly who God created her to be, even though it looks different from what we might think is "normal." When we look at Jenna, we see a picture of God's unconditional love for us imperfect humans.

The more I get to know Jenna, the more I think that a lot of us would be better off being a little bit like her. I love my special friend Jenna.



## Love for a Lifetime by Elaina Eby

A bright morning sun shed a warm benediction on the small table set for breakfast, including blueberries, milk, and bran flakes. A delicate bouquet of cheerful daffodils adorned the table for two. Balanced on one of the cereal bowls was a white envelope written with a shaky hand. The words “Happy Anniversary, Jim” nestled inside a big heart drawn with blue ink.

“Oh, Jane, I didn’t know your anniversary was today!” I exclaimed, looking into the gentle face of my eighty-seven-year-old cleaning client. With my own wedding just months away, I delighted in any kind of romance, no matter how timeworn.

“Sixty-three years today,” said the bride of yore as her watery blue eyes twinkled. “It seems like just a short time to me, but the dates don’t lie. I know Jim won’t remember, but I got him a card anyway.”

A slow shuffling of feet eventually brought the ninety-two-year-old groom to the table and, with unsteady balance, he dropped onto his chair. The once-brilliant mind of the engineer was succumbing to the unyielding tentacles of dementia. Jim’s shrinking world revolved around wandering about their spacious house or resting on the sofa with eyes staring off into days long past.

“What’s this doing?” Jim asked as his wrinkled hands fingered the envelope hiding his cereal bowl.

“It’s our anniversary today, dear,” Jane’s sweet voice said. “So I got you a card.”

“Is it your anniversary too?” he questioned with childlike innocence.

“It sure is!” she said with a laugh, placing her worn hand on his stooped shoulder. “We’re in it together, so there’s no backing out now.”

Jim nodded his hairy white head and chuckled. Dementia hadn’t quite stolen his sense of humor. His arthritic fingers carefully opened his card. On the front was a picture of a small boy and girl wading in the ocean. The words were touching for a couple so old: “If I could do it over again, I would have found you sooner and loved you longer.”

“Do we know them?” Jim’s quavering voice asked as he pointed a knobby finger at the little pair in the surf. “They’re cute.”

Jim and Jane began eating breakfast while I started with their weekly cleaning. When I came

back later to mop the dining room, Jim was wandering off humming a happy tune to himself. I watched Jane gaze lovingly at her once-competent spouse. She looked at me and smiled.

“When I married him all those years ago, my promise was for life,” she stated. “And in spite of every hurdle that age has set in our path, I still believe it. I know the world has changed their view on the permanence of marriage, but I still believe the Bible way. I’m a lifer with that wonderful old man, even when an anniversary means nothing more to him than another quiet day at home. I wouldn’t trade my years with him for all the wealth in the world. God’s been good to us.”

My eyes blurred as I picked up my mop bucket. Here I stood on tiptoes, peering down the corridors of a lifetime of love, but maybe my immature view was still looking at marriage as something that would benefit me and somehow enrich my life. Before me was beautiful, flesh-and-blood proof of a faithful spouse still giving one hundred percent to her marriage, even when her precious husband of over half a century couldn’t remember their special day, not to mention buying a bundle of red roses or a box of chocolates.

“Thank you for your inspirational example, Jane,” I said. “I think I will remember your unselfish commitment for years to come. And if God gives Kevin and me sixty-three happy years together, I want to be a completely committed sweetheart, just like you.”

### New Year’s Resolution

A single resolution forms  
Within me for this year:  
Instead of aiming far and wide,  
I’ll stay and settle here.  
For one thing is my heart’s desire,  
And one thing will I seek:  
To dwell within my Father’s house  
And hear what He will speak.



– Rebecca Weber