

2020 | July | August

# HomeFront

a spiritual parenting resource

share

**YOUR**

**STORY**

**LOVE & RESPECT**

*"God fills me with His love  
so I can give it away."*

**STORYTELLING**

*"God has a big story,  
and I can be a part of it!"*

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## A NOTE FROM MICHELLE

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*HomeFront* magazine is designed to help parents and grandparents disciple their children and grandchildren by creating environments in their homes that put God on display. Each issue gives practical ways to develop family nights or experiences in your home based on the 10 environments in my book *Spiritual Parenting*. It is vital for our children and grandchildren's spiritual growth to set aside time on a regular basis to engage in spiritual conversations and activities that are both fun and developmental.



**Dr. Michelle Anthony**

Michelle is the Executive Pastor of Family Ministries at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, CO. Michelle has graduate degrees in Christian education, theology, and leadership and more than 30 years of church ministry experience as a children's and family pastor. She is also the author of *Spiritual Parenting*, *The Big God Story*, *Becoming a Spiritually Healthy Family*, and *7 Family Ministry Essentials*. Michelle loves a good book and a cup of coffee.

 @TruInspiration

In this issue you will be focusing on the environments of **LOVE & RESPECT** and **STORYTELLING**.

- The environment of **LOVE & RESPECT** puts on display the way in which we lead and care for our children. As we show them love and respect in the way we listen, speak, and respond, we teach them how to love and respect us and others in their lives. We show it first before we expect to see it from them.
- The environment of **STORYTELLING** allows our children to understand the great narrative of the Bible with its emphasis on redemption. When we and our children know the story of God, we start to see that we are also a part of this story and desire to find our place in it. We further understand that God is asking us to share our stories of redemption with others so they in turn will be able to find their place His story.

I pray you will grow together as a family as you faithfully engage in the contents of this resource over the next two months.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

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**Holly Newman**

Holly is the Editor in Chief of *HomeFront* magazine and Pastor of Parents and Families at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, CO. She has pastored in family ministry for nearly 20 years and written curriculum for other authors as well as developed her own tween and teen curriculum on identity called *Girlytime*. Her passion is for families to create influential, faith-building moments with their children. She has been married to her high school sweetheart, Jared, for 18 years. They have four children: two girls and two boys. In her spare time she loves to get outdoors with her family.

**If you are like me, the last few months have been filled with deep valleys and very few mountaintops.** The various media outlets show a world filled with chaos and hatred. I find myself moving through a mixture of emotions from sadness to utter bewilderment. If I am not careful, fear and anxiety can take over my thoughts as I drive in the car or sit on the couch watching the news. It might be easy to think our children are not affected by the current situation, but they are moving through similar emotions. I want to encourage you to disciple your children through these times by creating a safe and loving atmosphere in your home that encourages questions and discussion.

This issue of *HomeFront* magazine will focus on the environments of **LOVE & RESPECT** and **STORYTELLING**. For July, **God's Word** (pages 10-11) looks at loving our neighbor through a verse-by-verse breakdown of 1 Corinthians 13. This timely tool can help us disciple our children to love others by extending kindness, responding peacefully, and persevering in Christ. August's **God's Word** (pages 22-23) gives an overview of The Big God Story narrative, the most important true story ever told. Flip through some fascinating articles in our resource section, including a poignant story about God's perfect plan through adoption, tips on teaching respect to your children, and ideas for how to keep your marriage story spicy.

I pray that your family has many opportunities to talk openly and ask questions as you navigate the current events in our nation. May you remember that "God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne" (Psalm 47:8). Trust in Him and know that He is good, **ALWAYS**.

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# 10

## ENVIRONMENTS

The order of the 10 Environments listed coincides with the monthly distribution of this resource.

# 2

*“God transforms me when I step out in faith.”*

## OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE

As children and students are challenged to step out of their comfort zone from an early age, they learn to experience a dependence on the Holy Spirit to equip and strengthen them beyond their natural abilities and desires. We believe this environment will cultivate a generation that, instead of seeking comfort, seeks a radical life of faith in Christ.

# 1

## RESPONSIBILITY

This environment captures the ability to take ownership for one’s life, gifts, and resources before God. A child must be challenged to take responsibility for his or her brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as for those who are spiritually lost. Our hope is that the Holy Spirit will use this environment to allow each child to understand that God has entrusted His world to us.

*“God has entrusted me with the things and people He created around me.”*

# 3

*“Asks the question, ‘What needs to be done?’”*

## SERVING

This posture of the heart asks the question, “What needs to be done?” It allows the Holy Spirit to cultivate a sensitivity to others and focuses on a cause bigger than one individual life. It helps fulfill the mandate that as Christ-followers we are to view our lives as living sacrifices that we generously give away!

# 4

## LOVE & RESPECT

Without love, our faith becomes futile. This environment recognizes that children need an environment of love and respect in order to be free to both receive and give God’s grace. Innate to this environment is the value that children are respected because they embody the image of God. We must speak to them, not at them, and we must commit to an environment where love and acceptance are never withheld due to one’s behavior.

*“God fills me with His love so I can give it away.”*

# 5

## STORYTELLING

The power of The Big God Story impacts our lives by giving us an accurate and awe-inspiring perspective into how God has been moving throughout history. It is the story of redemption, salvation, and hope and tells how I have been grafted into it by grace. It further compels us to see how God is using every person’s life and is creating a unique story that deserves to be told for God’s glory.

*“God has a big story, and I can be a part of it!”*

# 6

*"God knows me, and I can know Him."*

## KNOWING

Nothing could be more important than knowing and being known by God. We live in a world that denies absolute truth, and yet God's Word offers just that. As we create an environment that upholds and displays God's truth, we give children a foundation based on knowing God, knowing His Word, and a relationship with Him through Christ. God is holy, mighty, and awesome, and yet He has chosen to make Himself known to us!

# 7

*"I belong to God, and He loves me!"*

## IDENTITY

This environment highlights who we are in Christ. According to Ephesians 1, we have been chosen, adopted, redeemed, sealed, and given an inheritance in Christ ... all of which we did nothing to earn. This conviction allows children to stand firm against the destructive counter-identities the world will offer.

# 8

*"When I get off track, God offers me a path of healing."*

## COURSE CORRECTION

This environment flows out of Hebrews 12:11-13 and is the direct opposite of punishment. Instead, biblical discipline for a child encompasses a season of pain, the building up in love, and a vision of a corrected path for the individual with the purpose of healing at its core.

# 9

*"God's family cares for each other and worships God together."*

## FAITH COMMUNITY

God designed us to live in community and to experience Him in ways that can only happen in proximity to one another. The faith community serves to create an environment to equip and disciple parents, to celebrate God's faithfulness, and to bring a richness of worship through tradition and rituals, which offer children an identity. Our love for each other reflects the love we have received from God.

# 10

*"I see Christ in others, and they can see Him in me."*

## MODELING

Biblical content needs a practical living expression in order for it to be spiritually impacting. This environment serves as a hands-on example of what it means for children to put their faith into action. Modeling puts flesh on faith and reminds us that others are watching to see if we live what we believe.

*IT IS OUR PRAYER THAT HOMES AND CHURCHES WOULD CREATE THESE ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN TO LIVE IN SO THEIR FAITH WILL GROW IN A COMMUNITY OF CONSISTENCY, COMMON LANGUAGE, AND PRACTICE. TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW THESE ENVIRONMENTS CAN IGNITE A TRANSFORMING FAITH IN YOUR FAMILY, WE SUGGEST YOU READ:*



**SPIRITUAL PARENTING:**  
An Awakening for Today's Families

**BY MICHELLE ANTHONY**

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“Love is patient,  
*love is kind.*

It does not envy,  
it does not boast,

*it is not proud.*

It does not dishonor others,

it is not self-seeking,

it is not easily angered,

it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil

but rejoices with the truth.

*it always protects*

*always trusts,*

*always hopes,*

*always perseveres..”*

*1 Corinthians 13:4-7*



## GOD'S WORD

# week one

### GOD IS LOVE

**"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud." (1 Corinthians 13:4).**

If you could summarize the message of Christianity in one word, which word would you choose? From our first encounter with God's Word, we discover that He is full of love and vibrant creativity. Even after Adam and Eve chose to rebel against their Creator, we read about a God who loves, pursues, delivers, and redeems His people throughout His big story. This God of love has not only demonstrated perfect love but has invited His children to share this love with the world.

While the word "love" is quite common in the English vocabulary, how should we define it?

The apostle Paul gives us a good definition in 1 Corinthians 13. He begins by defining love with the qualities of patience and kindness. While these are beautiful virtues for everyone to live by, Paul is not merely telling people to be more virtuous. Instead, Paul is defining love as the character and nature of

God. God is patient. God is kind. God is love. The grand redemptive narrative of Scripture is a story of a patient and kind God who never gave up on His children even though they often chose to disobey.

As we study Paul's definition of love, let us remember that our ultimate aim is to be more like Jesus—who humbled Himself to the point of death to show us love (Philippians 2). Ask the Holy Spirit to give you words and ideas for loving actions toward your family, friends, and the challenging people in your life. After all, we were not easy to love, but Christ came and loved us anyway. Let us follow Jesus' example and live a life of patience, kindness, contentedness, and humility in all we say and do.

### DISCUSSION

Are there certain times or people that make patience and kindness difficult? Why do you think envying, boasting, and being proud are unloving things?

*by Victor Mendoza, Associate Pastor of Student Ministries*

## GOD'S WORD

# week two

### GOD IS PATIENT

**"It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5).**

Love does not dishonor others. Has God ever dishonored you? Because God is love, He does not dishonor or shame us. He truly loves us! The Father has poured out His love for us and calls us His children (1 John 3:1). This tells us so much about the character of God and really dives into how deep His love for us is.

Jesus sets a great example of how love is not self-seeking. Everything Jesus did here on earth pointed to who our big God is. Jesus even loved the people nobody else did. Jesus didn't seek the crowd's love; He was the same faithful Son when He was teaching and performing miracles as He was when the crowd was calling for Him to be crucified.

Psalm 86:15 says, "But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." We serve a good and loving God who is patient with us and slow to anger. When we sin, God doesn't quickly punish us, but rather He is full of forgiveness and gives us multiple opportunities to obey the plans He has for us.

"It keeps no record of wrongs." Love is forgiving. Love does not hold on to the mistakes or sins of our past. Dwelling on a "wrong" or a sin causes separation, but when a fault is confessed and forgiven, love heals the break. God has not called us to be separate from Him. He has called us to be in relationship with Him, and this happens through love.

### DISCUSSION

Is there someone in your life who is hard to love? How can you show God's love to that person?

*by Casey Thompson, Friday Early Childhood Coordinator*

## GOD'S WORD

# week three

### GOD IS TRUTH

**“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:6).**

Have you ever been secretly happy when a sibling got caught doing something wrong? Have you found yourself sad or envious when a sibling received grace for his sin? Although many of us have felt these things, those thoughts don't represent a Christlike love for others. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul talks about a Christlike love that is godly and selfless. Christ rejoices in truth and His heart is deeply grieved by sin.

In 3 John 1:4 it says, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth” (NASB). We are all children of God who are commanded to love one another as Christ loves us. Loving others means we aren't glad about anything that is wrong. We do not do wrong ourselves and invite others to join us—like making a joke about someone and laughing about it with our friends. And we do not encourage others to do wrong—like if a

friend's feelings were hurt and we helped her plan her revenge. We do not pick a side and cheer for one sibling over another. In these instances, our motive is not love for one another.

Christlike love rejoices in the truth. No matter how difficult it may be, the truth is always the best path through any situation. Christ is the truth (John 14:6), and the truth sets us free (John 8:31-32). Wanting the truth to prevail in our lives and others' lives is one way we can express love to one another.

If you are struggling to rejoice in truth for yourself, a sibling, a friend, or a coworker, ask God to fill you with His love each and every day.

### DISCUSSION

When have you rejoiced in a sin, unrighteous behavior, or injustice toward others? What was the fruit of those thoughts in your life and in your relationship with God?

*by Holly Newman, Pastor of Parenting and Families*

## GOD'S WORD

# week four

### GOD IS PROTECTOR

**“It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:7).**

The word “protection” means to cover or shield from danger or injury; to defend; to guard; to preserve in safety. God's love protects us, and this is why He calls us to a life of obedience. Sometimes we can see God's protection as a list of rules or checkboxes. Growing up, my mom gave us boundaries, but we had a choice to obey or disobey. I always thought she was being bossy or trying to take away the fun, but looking back I see that she gave us boundaries because she loved us and wanted to protect us.

Out of love, God created us in His image (Genesis 1:26-28). He trusted us to reflect who He is to those around us. Every interaction we have with one another is an opportunity to share God's love. This is why we are called to build one another up (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

The brokenness of the world tears us down and tries to strip us of hope, but in Christ, we have hope! Out of God's deep love for His children, He gave His one and only Son to give us hope that one day we will see Him face-to-face. Because of this great act of love, we have hope that we don't have to face separation from God or death.

After Jesus conquered death and was about to ascend to heaven, He told His disciples to wait for a gift (Acts 1:4). This gift is the Holy Spirit! God loves us so much that He wants to be with us always to comfort and empower us to persevere. I know when I'm going through a hard time, having someone in my corner to cheer me on gives me the strength to continue to press forward.

### DISCUSSION

As God protects us and builds us up in love, what are some ways you can be a defender, protector, and hope for a friend?

*by Rayshawne Hayes, Friday Elementary Coordinator*

## FAMILY TIME RECIPES

# Parmesan Tots with Dipping Sauce

In the summer, grilling for a quick dinner becomes a staple. These Parmesan tots are a nice complement to a summer barbecue or a great snack after a busy day outdoors.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 3 tablespoons chili sauce
- 3 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon yellow mustard
- 1 tablespoon sweet pickles, chopped
- 1 (2 pound) bag frozen potato tots
- 1½ tablespoons olive oil
- 1½ teaspoons garlic powder
- ½ cup Parmesan cheese, grated

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Combine chili sauce, mayonnaise, yellow mustard, and chopped sweet pickles. Toss potato tots, olive oil, and garlic powder on a baking sheet; roast at temperature specified on package for 25 minutes. Toss with Parmesan cheese and roast for an additional 3 to 4 minutes. Serve with sauce.



## FAMILY TIME RECIPES

# Blackberry Tart

Enjoy this refreshing twist on a blackberry cobbler with a hint of mint and a splash of lime. Your taste buds will love the combination of flavors.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 2 refrigerated rolled pie crusts
- 3 (6 ounce) containers of blackberries, divided
- ¾ cup confectioners' sugar, divided
- 3 tablespoons lime juice, divided, plus zest for garnish
- 1 pound mascarpone, at room temperature
- 1 ½ tablespoons chopped fresh mint, plus more for garnish

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Preheat oven to 425° F. Line an 8" x 11" tart pan with the pie crust dough (trim excess). Place pan on a rimmed baking sheet and prick dough on bottom with a fork. Line with parchment paper. (Baking tip: place dry beans on parchment paper while cooking to ensure the crust cooks properly.) Bake until crust begins to brown around edges, about 12 to 15 minutes. Make sure the bottom is light golden brown; remove paper. Set aside to cool.

Puree 1 container berries, 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar, and ½ tablespoon lime juice. Strain through a fine mesh sieve; discard seeds. Whisk together mascarpone and ½ cup confectioners' sugar with electric mixer on medium until stiff peaks form. Fold in blackberry puree. Toss together mint, remaining berries, 4 tablespoons confectioners' sugar, and ½ tablespoon lime juice in a bowl. Let sit 5 minutes.

Spread mascarpone mixture in crust. Top with berries and juices. Sprinkle with lime zest and mint. Serve immediately.



## FAMILY TIME RECIPES

# Cherry Almond Apple Coleslaw

This crunchy, fresh coleslaw is a simple way to combine several delicious flavors into a perfect side dish to share with family and friends.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

#### Coleslaw

- 1 package coleslaw cabbage
- 1 bag shredded carrots
- 2 Gala or Honey Crisp apples, chopped
- 5 green onions, chopped
- 1/2 cup sliced almonds
- 1/2 cup dried cherries

#### Dressing

- 1 cup plain Greek yogurt
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 3 tablespoons cider vinegar
- salt and pepper to taste

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Put the base ingredients of the coleslaw in a large bowl. Whisk together dressing ingredients in a small bowl until blended well. Toss everything together in a large bowl and serve immediately or refrigerate for a chilled salad.



## FAMILY TIME RECIPES

# Aloha Barbecue Sliders

There is something about pineapple and barbecue sauce on a burger that screams summer. This mouthwatering burger will definitely be a favorite among your family, and your kids will love the slider size.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 1 1/2 pound ground chuck beef (80% lean)
- 2/3 cup brown sugar barbecue sauce, divided
- 3 tablespoons bread crumbs
- 3/4 teaspoon Montreal Steak Seasoning
- 1 package (12 ounces) Hawaiian dinner rolls, in tray
- 3 slices Swiss cheese, quartered
- 1 can (8 ounces) pineapple slices, drained (reserve juice) and cut into thirds
- 6 slices bacon
- lettuce

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Spray cold grate of gas grill with grilling spray. Preheat grill for medium heat. Combine barbecue sauce with 2 tablespoons pineapple juice. Meanwhile, combine 1/3 cup of barbecue sauce mixture with beef, bread crumbs, and steak seasoning in large bowl. Shape mixture into 12 small patties.

Place pineapple slices in bowl with remaining barbecue sauce mixture and set aside. Grill patties 3 to 4 minutes on each side

or until cooked through (160° F). Meanwhile, remove attached rolls from package; do NOT separate. Cut in half horizontally. Spray cut sides with grilling spray; toast on grill. Remove pineapple slices from sauce and grill for 1 to 2 minutes on each side. Separate toasted rolls and assemble sliders: spread remaining barbecue sauce mixture on rolls, place small piece of lettuce on each roll, and then patties on bottom halves of rolls. Top with cheese, bacon, and pineapple. Close with tops of rolls.





# LOVE IS A *highway*

## CHALK ART AT HOME AND ON THE ROAD

Highways are the primary travel systems that connect towns and cities, and ultimately people's lives. God's perfect love is a highway that connects His life directly to ours—through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from the grave. His highway of love has a name: "it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way ... But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return" (Isaiah 35:8-10).

Take time to create some chalk art declaring and displaying what "Love is ..." on your driveway or sidewalk. Encourage and call others to God's highway of love by taking your "Love is ..." creativity on the road (next door, down the street, or across your city).

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Bible
- sidewalk chalk

### PART 1—AT HOME

1. As a family, read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a. Talk about what love is and what it is not. Make a list to spark ideas for part two.
2. Grab some sidewalk chalk and head outside. Using a concrete canvas (sidewalk or driveway), create some "Love is ..." chalk art. Get creative with your lettering and add drawings to depict what love is.
3. Older siblings can put love into action by helping younger brothers and/or sisters who may not be able to write or spell yet.
4. Inspire others by taking pictures and tagging us on Instagram: @nlcfamilies.

### PART 2—ON THE ROAD

1. Choose another family who might need some encouragement and go create a "Love is ..." message on their driveway/sidewalk.
2. Think about how to deliver some extra love—a bag of groceries, a box of doughnuts, a bouquet of flowers, or s'mores ingredients.
3. Have fun and be creative, connecting people to God's love and pointing others to the Way!

by Laurie Bennett, Director of Early Childhood

# TAGGED *in love*



## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- as many people as you can find
- space to move around

## BEFORE YOU PLAY

**Look around you, focus on the people playing the game, and start to think about the things you love and respect about them.** Think about their qualities and the ways you see Jesus in them. Our verse for this month is from 1 Corinthians 13, which focuses on how to love people. Love protects, trusts, hopes, and rejoices in truth! So speak truth in love as you play this game.

## TIME TO PLAY!

Pick one person to be the “tagger”; everyone else will be “runners.” The runners will spread out to avoid the tagger. The tagger will run around tagging as many people as possible, causing them to freeze in place once tagged. It seems pretty simple, right? But here’s the twist: the only way the runner can become untagged is by another runner saying something she loves or respects about that person. An example could be “I love when you read me a story” or “I respect your opinion about \_\_\_\_.” Continue this game until everyone is frozen or has run out of breath.

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*by Catherine Gerstenberg, Student Ministries Administration Assistant*

## WORSHIP RESPONSE

# Neighboring Well

**“Love the LORD your God” is the greatest commandment (Deuteronomy 6:5), and Jesus tells the Pharisees the second greatest commandment is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).**

In this season, with stay-at-home orders and with summer upon us, I see my neighbors more often than I have in the past. We wave hello while doing yard work or stand six feet apart while chatting over the fence. I believe we have the opportunity now more than ever to love our neighbors well, but I'd like to propose an even closer-to-home look at this call to love our neighbors.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5 beautifully spells out the benchmarks of a life lived out of love. “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”

First, consider who are your closest neighbors. For me, my closest neighbors are my husband and my children. Sometimes I find it easier to show patience and kindness to my neighbor over the fence, the barista who gave me my much-needed coffee, or the cashier at my local grocery store than to my own family. I know I have fallen short of these benchmarks of love with my closest neighbors, and I have learned something about God's love and forgiveness that I want to live out in our home. I want to be the first to admit and apologize when I miss the mark.

When we confess our shortcomings and are quick to apologize for not being patient or kind, we reinforce the environment of Love & Respect within our homes.

As a family, how are you living out this call to love your closest neighbors?

---

by Leah Tisthammer, Event Coordinator



## activity

- Create an environment for your family to pause. For us this looks like a comfortable setting where bellies are full, kids are in pj's, maybe I'm baking cookies, and worship music is on in the background. Take a moment to read 1 Corinthians 13 together and pray. Ask the Lord to show you how you can love each other better. If you have noticed someone in the family showing these benchmarks of love, encourage that person and praise her for her efforts—e.g., “I noticed your patience with your brother today.” Remember to keep it short and sweet. Baking cookies can be the perfect amount of time for our family; when the timer goes off, we can enjoy warm cookies to close our time together.
- Select a few families in your neighborhood to whom you can show the love of Christ. Some fun practical ideas may be chalking encouraging words or Scriptures on driveways or on prayer rocks. You could put together summer gift baskets with Frisbees, water balloons, bubbles, balls, recipes, and Scripture cards. Or perhaps you've been baking and can share some tasty treats with them. Ask your kids for ideas—they may surprise you with their thoughtfulness and creativity!

**Jesus lovingly gave of Himself while living here on earth and ultimately sacrificed His own life for the sins of the world.** Jesus was the perfect servant.

As a family, name a few ways that Jesus served others.

John 3:16 breaks down the “why” and “how” of Christ’s service. “For **God** so **loved** the world that **he gave** his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (emphasis added). Those two words, “loved” and “gave,” form the foundation for our service as well.

Our love for Jesus and our desire to follow His example should propel us into laying down our lives for others. Christian service is the act of showing God’s love with a willing heart. Following Jesus involves looking for ways to meet others’ needs using our talents, gifts, and abilities—and doing so sacrificially, putting the interests of others above our own.

Serving begins at home, reaches out to the local community, and expands globally. It’s a ripple effect! Here are a few ways to start the ripple effect in your family.

- **HOME**—Share ideas of ways families can serve each other. Create an Acts of Kindness Jar and invite family members to add a coin each time they serve in love or show respect within their home/family. “*Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves*” (Romans 12:10).

- **COMMUNITY**—Set a practical, simple goal to serve a neighbor or community group. The money saved in the Acts of Kindness Jar could be used to buy a card, flowers, or cookies for a neighbor or elderly person. Do some outdoors chores for someone in need or pick up trash in your neighborhood. “*Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others*” (Philippians 2:4 NKJV).

- **GLOBAL**—Select a global outreach ministry. You can ask for suggestions from your local church, as it may support global ministries or missions of interest to you and your family. Children can make cards or drawings to mail to children who live in orphanages. You may want to host a family lemonade stand and donate the proceeds to the global ministry or mission you have selected. “*The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’*” (Matthew 25:40).

**We are most like Jesus when we serve others!**

by Christy Thomas, North Nursery Coordinator

## THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF SERVING

*family prayer*

Dear God, show us ways we can serve others every day together as a family and individually.



## BLESSING

*bless with  
your words*

A BLESSING CAN BE A PRAYER OF COMMISSION, A BIBLE PASSAGE, OR WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT. BLESSINGS CAN BE SPOKEN OVER A CHILD FOR THE PURPOSE OF DECLARING GOD'S PROTECTION, JOY, AND WISDOM OVER HIM.



### WEEK 1

(Child's name), may you know that your heavenly Father is patient with you and that He delights in being kind to you. May you know that God is for you; He is not against you. His steadfast love for you endures forever and ever!

(1 Corinthians 13:4; Romans 8:31; Psalm 136)

### WEEK 2

(Child's name), may you know that God has forgiven you through Jesus Christ. May you know that you have been washed clean by His blood and have been made into a new creation. When God looks at His children, He sees the perfection and holiness of Jesus Christ. He sees you. He knows you. He loves you.

(1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Corinthians 5:17; John 3:16)

### WEEK 3

(Child's name), may you know that God unconditionally loves you and rejoices in you. You are His child to whom He gives His blessings of peace, joy, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. May you know that He is filling you up with His love so you can love others generously every day.

(1 Peter 4:8; John 15:12; Romans 8:14)

### WEEK 4

(Child's name), may you know that God is your protector and defender. Trust in Him because He is good. May you have hope God is constantly at work—bringing truth to light, fixing every wrong, and restoring joy to the brokenhearted. May you rejoice and be glad.

(2 Thessalonians 3:3; Isaiah 41:10; Psalm 5:11)

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*by Timothy Shepard, Pastor of Student Ministries*

# JOURNAL

remember and celebrate

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prayer

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thankfulness and praise

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**In him we have  
redemption  
through  
his blood,  
the forgiveness  
of sins,  
in accordance  
with the riches of  
God's grace.**

*—ephesians 1:7*

## GOD'S WORD

# week one

### THE BIG PLAN: God Is Redeemer

**Every good story has a beginning. The Big God Story is no different.** The Bible tells us that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

God created His good world. He created all things, those that are seen and those that are unseen, including mankind. When we read the Bible, we see that when God made mankind (humans) He also gave us a job to do. “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

How wonderful it must have been for Adam and Eve to live in God’s beautiful creation and work with Him to take care of His good world. The only rule their Creator gave them was to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Seems simple, right? As we continue to read through the first chapters of the Bible, we see that mankind could not obey even that one command from the Lord.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command, and sin entered God’s good world, effectively separating mankind from their Creator. Adam and Eve had to leave the beautiful garden God had made and were no longer able to be with Him in perfect relationship. But God had a plan to fix the broken relationship with His people. A plan to redeem His whole creation.

The rest of the Scripture is one grand redemptive narrative, a story of how God has redeemed His people and how we, as His people, should live in light of His redeeming work.

### DISCUSSION

The word “redeem” means to buy back or to give something you have so you can get something else. How has God shown Himself to be Redeemer in your lives or in the lives of people you know? Parents, this is a great opportunity to share some of your story of God’s redemption with your children.

*by Kendra Baker, Early Childhood Coordinator*

## GOD'S WORD

# week two

### THE BIG FAMILY: God Is a Covenant Keeper

**Have you ever made a promise you couldn't keep?** Has someone ever made a promise to you and then broken it? Throughout Scripture, God made promises to His people called covenants. What makes a covenant or promise from God so special is that God always keeps His promises. He has never gone back on His word or shown Himself unfaithful.

In 2 Peter, the apostle states, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (3:9).

In Genesis, God made a covenant with Abraham. Despite the fact that Abraham had no children, God promised to make Abraham’s descendants into a mighty nation and promised that all the nations on the earth would be blessed through his family. The Big God Story reveals that Abraham’s family eventually became the nation of Israel and the

bloodline for the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

God does not go back on His Word, and He does not break His promises. Scripture constantly reminds us of God’s great faithfulness. Maybe someone has broken his promise or word to you and it hurt you. It can be difficult to trust people when they don’t keep their promises. However, The Big God Story shows us that God never does this to His people. God is trustworthy. He will always be faithful and come through.

### DISCUSSION

What promises has God made to you in Scripture? Do you believe God is trustworthy and that He will keep His word? In what areas of your life do you doubt that God is faithful to keep His promise? How can you know that He is worthy of your trust?

*by Tim Shepard, Student Ministry Pastor*

**THE BIG PROMISE: Jesus Is the Promise**

**“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).**

Isaiah prophesied that a Savior would come with all authority and power to bring healing to the world. The Savior would redeem, restore, and fulfill the Old Testament laws. The one and only Savior, Messiah of the world, is Jesus!

In Genesis 3:15 we read the very first promise of a Savior when God says to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” God revealed in Genesis 12:3 and 2 Samuel 7:16 that Messiah would come from the line of Abraham and King David and would change the trajectory of history for His people, both Jews and Gentiles. The promise of a Savior is scattered throughout the Old Testament. God continued to

remind people that in His perfect timing He would send the Savior to redeem and restore relationship with His people.

Jesus is the divine fulfillment of that promise! Jesus is the Savior who frees us from the brokenness of the world. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

The Scriptures proclaim God’s love for His creation and His plan to restore heaven and earth to His initially intended perfection. Jesus came to restore relationship, and He will come again. Jesus is the promised Savior.

**DISCUSSION**

What do you think this world would look like today if Jesus had not come to save us from our sins? What does it mean to you that Jesus forgives us of our sins? What will Jesus restore when He comes back?

*by Katherine Sanchez, Downtown Children's Director*

**THE BIG NEWS: Jesus Is the Good News**

**“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).**

Jesus was and IS the best news our world has ever heard. Jesus paid for our sins on the cross and resurrected from the dead, AND it is His desire that EVERYONE knows Him—people from every continent on earth. After His resurrection, Jesus spent 40 intense days with His disciples and followers. He reminded them of His teachings and told them to stay put until the Holy Spirit came and filled them with power to go and share the good news with the rest of their city, their region, and the whole world.

Jesus knew that He could not physically be with each one of them, like the Holy Spirit could be, to help His followers tell the rest of the world. Peter, a fisherman, was transformed by his time with Jesus

and the filling of the Holy Spirit. He went from being an uneducated and untrained man to being a disciple of the resurrected Messiah who spoke the good news boldly in the packed city of Jerusalem.

And did the good news of Jesus fall on deaf ears as Peter shared why Jesus was the Son of God and the hope of the world? No! The Bible tells us in Acts 2 that about 3,000 souls were added to the family of God that day and the church began. Jerusalem was the beginning. Those who heard the good news there traveled beyond the city to Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth. Everywhere they went, the Holy Spirit helped them to share about Jesus and the good news—and He is with us today to do the same.

**DISCUSSION**

How do you see the good news of Jesus bringing light to dark places today? What would you say to explain the good news to someone who has not heard it?

*by Jessie Ragain, Downtown Elementary Lead*

## FAMILY TIME RECIPES

# Easy Chicken Flautas

With school starting back up, we all need some quick go-to recipes for dinner. These yummy chicken flautas will hit the spot and are easy to make. Serve with guacamole, salsa, or queso.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 1 shredded rotisserie chicken, or slow cook and shred 2 chicken breasts
- 8 ounces cream cheese
- 1/3 cup salsa
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese, or Mexican blend
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 12 (8") flour tortillas
- cooking spray or oil
- sour cream, guacamole, salsa, or queso (optional)

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Heat the oven to 400° F. Combine the shredded chicken with warmed cream cheese, salsa, cheese, cumin, garlic powder, salt, and pepper in a mixing bowl. Stir together until well combined. Spread about 6 tablespoons of the chicken mixture onto each tortilla in a strip down the middle. Roll up tightly and place them, seam sides down, on the cookie sheet. Spray the tops of the flautas with cooking spray or lightly brush oil. Don't soak them, but you want to have a decent coating so they turn brown and crispy. Bake for 18 to 20 minutes (or until lightly browned). Serve with sour cream, salsa, guacamole, or queso.



## FAMILY TIME RECIPES

# French Toast Nuggets

These French toast nuggets are any kid's favorite finger food. It doesn't get any better than small bite-sized pieces of French toast covered in cinnamon and sugar. Invite your kids to help make them!

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

#### Nuggets

- 8 slices white bread
- 2 eggs
- 1/4 cup milk
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 3 tablespoons butter for frying

#### Topping

- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Tear a slice of bread into fourths and roll each fourth into a ball. Next, whisk together eggs, milk, vanilla, and sugar. Dunk the balls of bread in the egg mixture and then fry in the butter. When the nuggets are fried to golden brown, take them out of the pan. Let them cool for a bit. Dump the topping of cinnamon and sugar into a gallon-size zip-top bag with the nuggets. Shake, shake, shake! Eat as is or with syrup.



## FAMILY TIME RECIPES

# Meatball Parm Monkey Bread

As school begins and life gets busy again, it's nice to have easy recipes that even your kids can make. While you are helping one kid with homework, another kid can make this garlic, cheesy goodness for dinner. Serve with a salad or veggies for a well-rounded meal.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 1/2 cup butter
- 5 cloves of garlic, minced
- 1 1/2 cups mozzarella cheese
- 1/2 cup Parmesan cheese
- 2 cans biscuit dough
- 1 bag frozen mini meatballs
- parsley, for garnish
- marinara sauce

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Preheat the oven to 325° F. Melt butter and add garlic; set aside. Mix mozzarella cheese with Parmesan cheese in a bowl; set aside. Next, open biscuit dough and cut each biscuit into fourths. Stretch one small piece of dough out a bit and place a mini meatball inside. Fold the dough around the meatball until it forms a complete ball. Place the dough ball in a greased Bundt pan. Repeat until all the dough is rolled with a meatball. Once you have filled the pan with half of the dough balls, brush the tops with half of the buttery garlic mixture and half of the cheese mixture. Then add the remaining dough balls and cover with the buttery garlic mixture (leave a little to brush on top once it comes out of the oven) and cheese mixture. Bake in the oven for 20 minutes. Remove from oven and pan, brush remaining buttery garlic mixture, and sprinkle with additional cheese (optional). Cook for an additional 20 minutes on a cookie sheet. Top with parsley and serve with marinara sauce.



## FAMILY TIME RECIPES

# Monster Cookie Icebox Cake

This no-bake, no-hassle icebox cake has fun and celebration written all over it. It's sweet and creamy and your kids will love it. Consider making this cake for a back-to-school celebration, birthday, or family reunion.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 1 liter whipping cream (heavy cream)
- 1 1/2 cups sweetened condensed milk
- 26-32 chocolate chip cookies
- 24 Oreo cookies, plus more for crushing over top of cake
- 1 1/2 cups M&Ms

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Lightly spray or butter a 9" x 13" rectangular baking dish. Whip the whipping cream to soft peaks. Pour in the sweetened condensed milk in a steady stream, continuing to whip until the cream reaches hard peaks. Layer 13 to 16 chocolate chip cookies in the bottom of the baking dish and top with 1/3 of the whipped cream mixture. Then sprinkle 1/3 of the M&Ms over the cream mixture and top with Oreo cookies. Repeat this layering process one more time. To top off the cake, add the remaining whipped cream mixture and additional crushed Oreos and M&Ms. Chill the cake in the fridge overnight or approximately 12 hours.





# Snapshot Storybook

**“God has a big story, and I can be a part of it!”** Make a family storybook and remember how God is using your family to create a unique story that deserves to be told for God’s glory. The Big God Story is God’s story of redemption, salvation, and hope that tells how those who follow Him have been grafted into it by grace. The Bible is one continuous story of little substories that point to redemption in Jesus. As you create this storybook, recall the substories God has written for your family. Start by thinking through some of your favorite memories from family vacations, celebrations, or mile markers!

## WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- construction paper
- scrapbook paper or cardstock
- family photos
- glue stick
- markers

## WHAT YOU’LL DO

Together as a family, use construction paper, scrapbook paper, or cardstock and copies of family photos to create a timeline of memories.

Take turns having each family member tell what he or she remembers about that moment, event, vacation, etc., and write a note in the margins or draw a picture about what God did in each of those times for your family.

Write Ephesians 1:7 in your book or choose a family verse together that helps you remember who God is to your family. You might like to write it on the cover or use it progressively throughout the pages.

Perhaps leave some empty pages and add some photos, drawings, and notes in the coming years!

When you’re finished with your book, take a moment to thank God for how He has included your family in His big story. Pray that He will continue to guide your family to glorify Him moving forward.

*by Kaitlyn Morgan, Family Care Administrative Assistant*



# THE 30-SECOND STORY

## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- paper
- pencil
- timer

## BEFORE YOU START

**How do we know what we do about the life of Jesus and the gift of grace He offers?** Storytelling! Practice your storytelling by playing the 30-Second Story. Before you begin, write the list of words below at the top of the paper to be your word bank.

## TIME TO PLAY!

Begin by sitting in a circle with your family. The first player will have 30 seconds to start writing a story using the word bank listed at the top of the paper. After the 30 seconds have passed, the player will pass the paper to his left. Restart the 30-second timer for the next player and let her continue the story the first person began. Continue this story train until every person in the circle has gone twice. Remember, use the words from the word bank, and everyone gets a 30-second turn before she passes the paper! At the end of the round, read the complete story out loud to see if it makes sense. Once you have played using the word bank below, consider drafting another word bank using your own funny and creative list of words.

*word bank*

- grace
- pants
- finally
- dance
- water
- forgive
- shirt
- between
- dragon
- beach
- kindness
- cow
- run
- trees
- free
- Daniel Tiger
- skip
- flowers

*helpful tips!*

- Explain the words from the word bank before beginning the game.
- If you have younger children, pair them with adults or older siblings. They can also draw pictures.



# The greatest Story

**God's Word is the greatest story ever told!** As the story unfolds, we see a King running after His broken loved ones to redeem and restore them and bring them into His kingdom to live with Him forever.

As present-day Christians, we have been grafted by grace into God's big story and get to play a part in His ongoing narrative. The beauty of understanding our part in the story is that we can rest knowing He is working all things together, He knows the whole story from beginning to end, and He is redeeming all things in His time and in His way.

This realization leads us to a response of worship. We are free to delight in God's character and be who we were created to be—true worshippers in every aspect of our lives!

### WHAT TO DO

1. Retell The Big God Story—you can find this in the Kids Camp Home Edition resources at [nlcfam.org](http://nlcfam.org).
2. Thank the Lord for giving us His Word, the greatest story ever told, and for including you in it!
3. Read Revelation 12:11. We get to tell the story of God's love and redemption in our lives. We call this our testimony.
4. Take some time for each of you to share your story or testimony about how you became part of God's family.
5. How have you seen God work in your life?
6. Write or draw a picture of your story.
7. Respond to the wonder of the good news of The Big God Story with worship—sing, dance, and pray with thanksgiving.

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by Lori Welch, Family Care and New Mom Educator

# Listen to a Story

**“WE WILL TELL THE NEXT GENERATION THE PRAISEWORTHY DEEDS OF THE LORD, HIS POWER, AND THE WONDERS HE HAS DONE” (PSALM 78:4).**

**We all love a good story, and discovering one may be closer to home than you think.** Locked up inside the minds of your parents, grandparents, and others are real-life stories just waiting to be told. Provocative questions and a listening audience are keys to opening these past experiences and bringing them to life. I’ve discovered that books and movies based on true stories and biographies can be more exciting than fiction.

For over 2,500 years, the Bible primarily passed from one generation to the next through faithful storytelling. We learn about God’s character through the lives of people like Adam, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Peter, Paul, and Jesus. We read about the blessings of those who chose to follow God’s ways and the tragedies of those who disobeyed. Of course, Jesus Himself is a master storyteller. The messages He delivered on earth could hold the attention of a crowd all day long. While we may not all be as captivating, we can develop the much-needed skill of storytelling ourselves and prompt others to share their experiences as well.

**Spending time with family members or friends and actively listening to events that have happened in their lives honors them and shows them that they matter to God and to us.** You can connect with grandparents (even if they’re not your own), neighbors, someone from church, or perhaps a lonely person in a nursing home. You can learn from their mistakes, rejoice in their triumphs, and be strengthened in your faith. Storytelling keeps people’s memories alive by passing them on to the next generation and, in the process, can develop deep and lasting friendships.

Here are a few tips to get you started.

## WHO

Decide on the person you want to interview: a parent, grandparent, neighbor, or someone in a retirement or nursing home. If you’ll be asking about his or her faith in Jesus, choose someone who is a believer.

## WHERE

Ideally, you’ll want to talk with someone face-to-face whenever it’s convenient. However, you may also use FaceTime, Zoom, Skype, or some other form of visual communication. A phone conversation would be better than an email or letter since there’s two-way dialogue.

## HOW

- Prepare your questions in advance. This will keep the conversation flowing (see some of the following examples).
- Make eye contact with the person and lean forward to show you’re listening.
- A younger child may engage more actively if he role-plays being an interviewer and gets to hold a microphone (be creative here).
- After asking a question, listen carefully without interrupting. Try not to think of the next thing you’re going to say until the person is done talking.
- Write down or record the person’s answers so

you can reflect on his or her stories and pass them on. You may want to post some words of wisdom on social media to encourage others.

- Continue to connect with the person you interviewed; you may want to write a thank you note or even put together a memory book or recording of the stories he or she shared.

## WHAT TO ASK (SAMPLE QUESTIONS)

- How did you come into relationship with the Lord? Tell me your story.
- What is your favorite part of the Bible or a meaningful verse? Why is that special to you?
- What is one memorable event that happened in your life? How did you see God in that circumstance?
- How did your faith in God help you through a difficult time?
- What advice would you give to a young person?
- What was life like when you were a child, and how have things changed?
- What makes you laugh or brings you joy?

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*by Jill Nardini, Elementary Teacher*

## BLESSING

# *Bless with Your Words*

### WEEK 1

(Child's name), may you know that your heavenly Father is your rock. Do not fear; He is always guiding and directing your path. May you know that God is redeeming the broken things in your life for His glory. May you know that He loves you unconditionally and calls you His own!

(Psalm 111:9; Isaiah 43:1)

### WEEK 2

(Child's name), may you know that God is faithful to keep His promises toward you. He is patient with you. May you know He will never leave you or forsake you. He is a good God who can be trusted. Cast your cares on Him because He loves to be generous to you.

(2 Peter 3:9; Joshua 23:14)

### WEEK 3

(Child's name), may you know that God unconditionally loves you. He takes your brokenness and makes you whole. May you know that He is walking with you and giving you the strength to resist temptation and follow Him every day. May you know that you are righteous in His sight by His grace and forgiveness.

(Romans 5:8; Psalm 103:10-14; Romans 3:23-24)

### WEEK 4

(Child's name), may you know that the Holy Spirit is with you, speaking to you and guiding you. May you know that you have been given power and confidence to share the gospel boldly through the Holy Spirit. May you know that you do not need to be afraid. God has given you power, love, and wisdom to walk in righteousness.

(Acts 1:8; John 16:13)

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by Evie Swart, Director of Midweek Programming



**A BLESSING CAN BE A PRAYER OF COMMISSION, A BIBLE PASSAGE, OR WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT. BLESSINGS CAN BE SPOKEN OVER A CHILD FOR THE PURPOSE OF DECLARING GOD'S PROTECTION, JOY, AND WISDOM OVER HIM.**

# JOURNAL

## remember and celebrate

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## thankfulness and praise

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# RESOURCES *and* SUPPORT

EQUIPPING YOUR FAMILY

# get your family talking

WHEN YOU'RE IN THE DRIVE-THROUGH ...

**In the past few months, most of us have had more time with our children than we know how to fill.** No doubt your children have had their questions about the coronavirus and COVID-19 and this season has affected them in one way or another. As a parent, you are uniquely positioned to provide support and reduce anxiety. One way to do that is to get them talking. Ask questions during a game, over dinner, or on a walk and listen to the responses.

1. What are you hearing about the coronavirus/COVID-19 that concerns you or maybe you don't understand?
2. What has been the hardest part of the last few months for you?
3. What has been the best part of the last few months for you?
4. If you could vacation somewhere right now, where would it be?
5. How have you seen God's faithfulness to our family during this season?

## Keeping Up with Your Kids



During this season, it can be easy to allow our children to watch more television than normal or sit behind a tablet for an extra 30 minutes because all other “typical” activities have limitations or restrictions. If your kids are moping around complaining that there is nothing to do, here is a list of fun activities to keep your kids using their imaginations and staying active outdoors.

1. **Backyard Camping**—The entire family can help prepare the campsite and bring games or books to read. S'mores and charades will help create a fun-filled evening even if you don't make it through the night in the tent.
2. **Sidewalk Art Show**—Invite each family member to draw a picture on a square of the sidewalk. Once everyone is finished, view each family member's artwork.
3. **Family Workout**—Each family member can pick one exercise for the entire family to do as a group workout.
4. **Backyard Kickball**—Do you remember this game? Played like baseball, even the youngest members of the family can play. Grab a large rubber ball and run the bases.
5. **Flashlight Tag**—This game has to be played at night with everyone dressed in black. One person stands at one end of the yard and holds a flashlight. The other family members begin at the other end of the yard. The family members must run from one end of the yard to the other without getting hit by the flashlight beam. If you get tagged, you go back to the beginning. The first one to make it to the side of the yard wins.



# Reflect on Love

**Young children allow us the opportunity to slow down and enjoy the simple things in life. They see beauty everywhere.** Where we see weeds, they see flowers. Where we see mud, they see pies! When we want to run from a snake, they want to watch, chase, and even catch it!

This week, take time to get down on your child's level and see things through his or her eyes. When your child admires a creature or object in nature, say, "God made that!" Look at the beauty all around you and tell your child God put beauty in this world to show His love for us.

Lie down in the grass with your child.

Ask your child to listen with you. What do you hear? Birds chirping? Frogs calling?

Ask your child what she feels. The cool breeze?

Look up at the sky. Ask your child what she sees. Big, white, fluffy clouds? A dinosaur? A heart? A truck? Be creative and try to see what she sees. Laugh together.

**All the things you see and hear are love gifts from God!**

God created the incredible beauty in nature as a way to show us how much He LOVES us.

As you are lying in the grass, ask your child what kind of gifts we can give people to show them we love them.

She may think of tangible gifts—something we can make or buy.

Let your child know that the BEST gifts we can give cannot be purchased at the store.

The best kind of gift we can give is to LOVE people as described in the Bible.

(You could bring your Bible or have these verses written on an index card.)

**1 Corinthians 13 says:**

Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not want what belongs to others. It does not brag. It is not proud. It does not dishonor other people. It does not look out for its own interests. It does not easily become angry. It does not keep track of other people's wrongs. Love is not happy with evil. But it is full of joy when the truth is spoken. It always protects. It always trusts. It always hopes. It never gives up. (NIRV)

**After reading and thinking about this passage, ask again, "How can we show love to each other?"**

- Be patient when your brother takes your toy? YES!
- Tell the truth? Absolutely!
- Be kind even when someone else is mean? 100 percent!
- Protect someone who's smaller than you? Definitely!

Just like God gives us all kinds of beautiful gifts to show His love for us, we can give beautiful gifts back to God and to others by showing this kind of love for them.

Ask your child to hold your hand and say a prayer as you continue to lie in the grass, gazing at the big, blue sky.


"Father, I pray that my child knows Your love and shows Your love. Reveal Your great love to me and to my child. Empower us to love each other. We pray that You make us kind, content, humble, honest, trusting, hopeful, forgiving, and enduring. Thank you for creating LOVE, creating beauty, and allowing me to be (child's name) mom/dad.

In Jesus' name, amen.

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by Kathryn Egly

Kathryn is a mom to four boys. Visit her site where she writes to encourage families.

 [kathrynegly.com](http://kathrynegly.com)

NEVER LOSE AN OPPORTUNITY OF SEEING ANYTHING BEAUTIFUL, FOR BEAUTY IS GOD'S HANDWRITING. —RALPH WALDO EMERSON

# RESPECT

**Is it just me or are kids today ruder than ever?** A few months ago, I was attending my daughter's school volleyball game. The loud cheers from the fans didn't quite drown out the rude comments from the children standing in front of me. The sweet lady at the concession stand was trying to politely meet the demands of the children as each one talked over the other. Their requests changed multiple times as each assumed he deserved attention immediately. After a few minutes of this, the patient lady turned to the kids to say, "One at a time. And I want to hear please and thank you when making your order."

While I appreciated the efforts of the woman to teach some respect to the children, the eye-rolling and snickering from them made me doubt that it actually worked. **This exchange left me thinking about the character quality of respect among children today and within my own children.** How would my children handle that situation? Would they wait patiently to be served? Would they use their manners? Or would I see my children talking over one another, demanding service, and then mocking any attempt at correction?

I think it is important to ask these questions of our children. Assessing them (and ourselves) will help ensure that the art of giving and requiring respect will continue into future generations. First Peter 2:17 says this: "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor." The word "respect" in this passage is a translation of the Greek word *timēsate*, meaning "honor or value." As we teach our children respect for others, we must teach them to honor or value those around us and those in authority over us regardless of whether that person deserves it or has earned it. We respect others as we follow Christ.

## Teach Respect by Showing Respect

Our children will subconsciously emulate our behavior. A good place to start is to look at our own actions first. Your child needs to see you being respectful with other people. This includes the way you speak about your spouse, co-workers, friends, the president, your pastor, and government officials. In front of your boss, you may display respect, but if you talk openly about your boss in a negative light at home or with others, your children will pick up on that behavior.

**Modeling respect also includes complimenting your children and trusting them.** Treat each one equally, keep your promises to your children, and pay attention when they speak. Point out respect and disrespect when you see it. This teaches your children that others can see when they are respectful and when they are not.

## Teach Your Child to Respect Himself

Give your child opportunities to be responsible and independent so he can begin to grow in his own strengths. Believe that your child can do the job you have given him to do. Help him be successful but don't take over.

Speak God's identity over your child and do not allow negative talk. When my child says the words "I can't" or "I am not enough," I have my child speak what God says instead. The self-negative words spoken disrespect God's creation. We are to respect God's creations.

## Teach Respect for Rules

Rules and structure are great for kids. It is important for your child to understand that you have rules for certain reasons. It is equally important for them to obey those rules when no one is watching, or when they may not get in trouble for disobeying a rule. You can set the example when you follow the speed limit, don't litter, obey park signs, etc. Obeying all rules and not just some of them helps children learn integrity.

## Expect and Require Respect

Don't tolerate your child being disrespectful to teachers, coaches, family members, or friends. If you allow disrespect with some people, it will eventually flow into how they treat all people. Respect should be given to everyone regardless of whether he or she deserves it.

## Praise Respect

As we try to teach any aspect of character development to children, we have to give praise and point out the areas of growth. Let your child know when she has done something well and that it makes you proud. Praise and positive reinforcement will motivate your child to be more aware of this good behavior and to repeat it.

## A Short Devotional for Elementary Students on Respect

Read 1 Peter 3:8-9.

Peter calls us to be "like-minded" and "love one another," encouraging sympathy, compassion, and humility. Can we summarize these with one word? Respect. Respect sees every person as an image bearer of God and as His own child whom He loves dearly.

In addition, we are to show respect even to those who accuse us or wrong us. After all, Jesus was accused and wronged for doing good but continued to respect those individuals whom God loved. **We need to respond to others in such a way that shows a person she is highly honored and valued.** As we give respect to others, we show them the love of God.

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by Holly Newman, Pastor of Parenting and Families

# can dating be healthy?

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7; 15:33; 2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-15.

**If only there were a secret formula to the perfect dating relationship.** There is no shortage of Christian and non-Christian voices attempting to offer an idealistic approach to dating. Amid the noise, the question remains: what is the foundation of a godly dating relationship? We found a few essential principles that established a healthy foundation as we navigated this season of life together.

Before we share these formational ideas, we would like to provide some context for our dating story. After meeting in high school and starting our relationship following my (Victor's) first year of college, we experienced dating both in the same city as well as over long distance. After two years of enjoying summers together and navigating long distance through the fall and spring semesters, we discovered three critical values as we journeyed through our dating years.

- 1. Pursue Jesus.** If Jesus is not your treasure, you will find yourself looking to your boyfriend or girlfriend for your significance, identity, and satisfaction. As exciting as it was to date one another, there were numerous moments when we realized the other person was not perfect. These moments of hurt and frustration served to remind us that only Jesus could make us complete. If you feel that you need a dating relationship, that may be a warning sign that you have not made Jesus your treasure.
- 2. Prioritize wisdom.** Wisdom is valuable in all seasons of life, and dating is no exception. During our relationship, we discovered the safety that comes from seeking godly counsel. Whether it was from our parents, mentors, or trusted friends, we

found guidance in both the hardest and best times of dating. We were not designed to do any season of life alone, including dating.

- 3. Protect values.** Values are the non-negotiables of character. Establishing values in advance sets the precedent for what you are looking for in a boyfriend or girlfriend. For me (Victor), I placed a high value in having a girlfriend who was committed to serving in the local church (which is how I met Preem). I (Preem) valued dating someone who had strong leadership characteristics. While physical attraction is part of the picture, the healthiest dating relationships are value driven.

**Every dating story is different.** However, we believe these three principles are paramount to all godly and healthy dating relationships. If you want to love and respect your significant other, pursue Jesus. If you want to look back on your dating years without regret, prioritize wisdom. If you want to find someone who will help you run the race of faith, protect values.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What areas in your life are competing with Jesus to be your treasure?
2. Who are people in your life you can go to for godly counsel?
3. What character traits do you want your current/future boyfriend or girlfriend to demonstrate?

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by Victor Mendoza, Associate Pastor of Student Ministries and his wife Preem.

# WHEN WE LISTEN

**Specialized needs.** What does that even mean? Does it mean that this article is for those who have someone in their family or friend circle with a disability? Does specialized needs refer to those who have a diagnosis of some sort, like autism, Down syndrome, or cerebral palsy?

The short answer is yes, but it also means so much more! Have you ever had a rough day, week, month, or year and thought to yourself, “If you only knew what I am going through, you wouldn’t be so ...”? Are there unique circumstances in your life that have brought you into a season of need—whether emotional, physical, financial, or spiritual?

Like me, I’m sure your answer to that last question is a hearty yes. Even so, it is easy for us to forget that each person has a unique life story. Why are we so quick to assume things about people?

James 1:19b says, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” When I get angry with someone, I usually jump to conclusions and make up a story in my head about why she did what she did. What if I stopped and asked myself the question, “What’s her story? Is there something going on in her life that I am not aware of?” Do I take time to ask questions and truly listen?

**Currently, with racism raising its ugly head yet again, the COVID-19 pandemic, and political tension all around, many of us may have found ourselves being quick to speak and get angry.** As humans, our tendency is to make up our own stories in our minds even though we may not have all of the facts. Or, some of us may retreat to a place of apathy, feeling too overwhelmed by it all. The truth is, neither of those extremes are what God desires for us.

Let’s consider that verse in James again. What does being quick to listen and slow to speak imply? I believe that God wants us to guard our hearts and consequently our thinking. Like it says in Proverbs 4:23, “Above all else,

guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” What if, by way of guarding my heart, I slow down long enough to ask, “I wonder what her story is? Is there more to this situation than meets the eye?” James seems to be challenging us to guard our thinking and then to allow that mindfulness and the Holy Spirit to guide our actions.

I have my own story. Not long ago, you may have seen me at the grocery store and I may have seemed distant to you. Would you have assumed that I was being rude, or would you have wondered what my story was that day? Would you have been surprised to find out that I was concerned about my homeless son who struggles with hidden disabilities? Another day, you may have seen me at church, decked out in my Sunday best and looking like I’ve got it all together. Would you assume that I come from a perfect family rather than a broken one where my mom died in a car accident when I was a baby? My point is there is always more to the story.

What if we took more time to consider each others’ stories and let them guide our thinking and actions? Most situations are complex. Rarely is a situation black and white. How do we let God guide us in this journey? How often do we let Philippians 2:3-4 truly lead us to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit”? Do we really value others above ourselves, not looking to our own interests but to the interests of others? Do we allow these principles to sink in and guide our thinking and actions?

There’s a quote going around Facebook by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that says, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” With the love and respect modeled for us by Jesus, we too can drive out the darkness and hatred in our world one story at a time.

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by Neva Ringdahl, *Specialized Needs and Adoption/Foster Support*



**I HAVE A STORY. YOU HAVE A STORY.**



# Pulling Together

**I spent 10 years as a Navy wife.** We had been married five years and our oldest son was two when Steve enlisted, and we jumped into the deep end of military life. Being a military family meant that love and respect had to be frequently used tools in our toolbelt. Without them, success would have been difficult—if not impossible.

I spent my first few years as a Navy wife learning how to navigate the new way of living with its unusual language, transient lifestyle, odd way of doing things, AND its way of uprooting us every few years. It was challenging, stressful, and overwhelming at times, and I quickly learned that we had to be in it together. Our family of four had to pull together, relying on our love and respect for one another and our relationship with the Lord as our foundation, if we were going to make it through.

What did “pulling together” look like?

Pulling together meant that everyone’s voice was heard. We all needed the others to appreciate our perspective; we could not overlook anyone. In listening to each other, we could understand where each person was coming from and why he felt the way he did about things. Listening is crucial to love and respect as it places you inside the other person’s shoes.

Each of our children speaks his own “language,” so as parents we have to learn to hear what is being said even before they can talk. What does it mean when they go silent or scream? What are they saying? **We have to learn the whys AND learn to be okay with what they are telling us.** Here is an example from our lives:

Our youngest son, David, is fiercely independent and has been since the day he was born. Since he could do things for himself, he wanted to do things on his own. As his mom I had to learn to ask, “Would you like help?” and be okay when he told me, “No.”

My love and respect for David demanded that I allow him to be the person God created him to be and not force my desire to help on him. The love and respect you extend to your children will be unique to your relationship and will look different with each of them.

Pulling together also meant being intentional about how we communicated. There was no room for the phrase “You do it because I said so.” The “why” was needed. The “why” is where love and respect grow. When you are moving around every few years—completely upending your lives—everyone has to be on the same page. I learned early on that good communication was key to my boys being able to hear me—and for them to feel loved and respected.

### Here are a few of my favorite communication tools:

1. Gather as much information as you can so when your small ones ask (and you know they will) you have a true answer to give them.
2. Explain everything (as much as it is within your power) before it happens and give them the positive and negative consequences of the choices they make. Stating the consequences ahead of time means no one is taken by surprise.
3. Tell the truth, even when it seems the answer may be over their heads. There will be many times that life will be tough. Speaking the truth to your children, in love, will show them they can always count on you to “tell it to them straight”—something that will serve them well when they are adults in need of wisdom for their own journey.

It takes intentionality to instill love and respect in our children, and they are things we have to give to them if we want to receive them in return. The reward for your effort is a beautiful, priceless relationship with adult children who love and respect those they walk in relationship with.

by Jacqui Lochridge

Jacqui and her family are proud to be military; she is a Navy wife and Navy mom. She has been married to Steve for 28 years, and together they have two adult sons, a daughter-in-law, and an adorable granddaughter. She is a pastor at New Life Church and an ordained minister with the Assemblies of God and has been walking with Father God for 33 years.

# Finding God

**Have you ever spent time exploring a search-and-find book?** As a child, I remember poring over *Where's Waldo?* books in the school library with friends as we searched for the man in the red and white shirt. Sometimes Waldo jumped right out at you and other times you had to grid search the page more than once before finding the hidden character. Although it has been a few years since I have searched for Waldo, I still love the challenge of searching for hidden treasure and finding things in unexpected places.

As parents we have this incredible responsibility to disciple and train up our children. Ultimately our goal is not just to describe God to our children but to help them FIND God. We want them to see God in the pages of Scripture, in creation, in others, and in their own lives.

One of my favorite places to find God is in the midst of films. If you are anything like me, you may have a hard time recalling the sermon you heard last week but you can still quote a movie line from something you saw 10 years ago. **I think that is one reason why Jesus chose to speak in parables; those stories still speak to us thousands of years later!** Now, when I talk about finding God in the midst of movies, I am not just talking about *Veggie Tales*, *The*



“AS PARENTS WE HAVE THIS INCREDIBLE RESPONSIBILITY TO DISCIPLE AND TRAIN UP OUR CHILDREN. ULTIMATELY OUR GOAL IS NOT JUST TO DESCRIBE GOD TO OUR CHILDREN BUT TO HELP THEM *FIND* GOD.”



*Passion of the Christ*, or *Facing the Giants*. I believe all stories that resonate with the human heart are somehow a reflection of the gospel or tell some part of The Big God Story. We cannot deny how stories of good overcoming evil, sacrifice, love, loyalty, forgiveness, justice, and grace move us to the core.

Recently, I had a conversation with my 10-year-old niece, Daisy. I decided to play “Where’s God” with her favorite film, *Aladdin*. After a few minutes of talking through the movie together she pointed out how Aladdin chose to use his last wish to set the genie free. Then she compared that to how Jesus willingly gave His last breath to ultimately set us free. Although we didn’t dive further in our discussion together, it is worth pointing out that there are multiple other facets of that story that resonate with the gospel story: a father’s love; our identity as sons and daughters of God and not as street rats; compassion for the poor; seeing value in others beyond their position in society; the fact that Aladdin’s sacrifice of his wish would have set the genie free but also would have kept the power from the evil villain who was there to kill, steal, and destroy; how a thirst for power can lead to bondage.

**One of the core principles of spiritual parenting is looking at life and Scripture through the lens of God’s grand redemptive narrative or The Big God Story.** When we look at Scripture this way, it helps us not just see the flawed people that fill the pages of the Bible but it helps us find God and see His character in the midst of their stories. So in one sense the entirety of Scripture can be read like a search-and-find book where we continually ask, “Where’s God?,” “What does God look like?,” and “Who is God?” It is critical that we first answer these questions in Scripture before we move on to other places in life where we can ask these same search-and-find questions. **As you watch a film with your children or enjoy a book together, don’t neglect the discussion.** Ask questions and point things out to your child that center on the character of God. Stories are powerful tools for us to use as we disciple our kids.

by Jared Newman

Jared has a passion for middle school ministry and has been working with these students and their families for the past 17 years. Jared is currently a film and ministry consultant with Impact Productions. He and his wife, Holly, have four children and have enjoyed living in Colorado and serving with New Life Church since 2005.

# The Secret Spice in Marriage

**Brett and I started doing at-home date nights a few years ago. We moved a little farther outside of town, and our favorite babysitter was away at college.** Our continued priority to intentionally connect and Brett's newfound interest in cooking collided, and before long, at-home dates became an anticipated tradition.

We're in the thick of raising our school-aged kids, maintaining and updating a 1970s house, building a career (Brett), homeschooling (me), fostering community for ourselves and our kids, and navigating ever-changing family rhythms and priorities. It's a sweet season of life, but it can also be wearing on a marriage. If we weren't purposeful with our time, we could easily go weeks without a pause to connect. We may watch a show together before falling asleep or fit in a quick conversation about a recent headline before Brett heads out the door in the morning. While these stolen moments are needed connection points, they're no substitution for thoughtful, cultivated time together that strengthens our love for one another.

Most recently, we've found ourselves experiencing the unsettling days of a pandemic. For many of us, this season has sprouted fresh anxieties, loneliness, uncertainties, financial stress, and a multitude of other emotions. Brett and I have come to love our date nights even more during this time. Our dates allow us to step away from the noise for a few hours. They leave us feeling tethered to each other and hopeful for what's to come.

A few times a month, we feed the kids a simple dinner and let them watch a movie before an early bedtime. Brett typically does some of the dinner prep before the kids go to bed. And after we say our good nights, our date night begins.



GIVE IT  
A TRY

*at home date night*

- Set aside a thoughtful, purposeful, and cultivated time together that strengthens your love for one another.
- Have the whole family on the same page about the children's early bedtime.
- After saying good nights to children the date night begins.
- Choose a meal you both love and enjoy purposeful conversation.
- For dinner ideas visit our Instagram or [bit.ly/StayAtHomeDate](https://bit.ly/StayAtHomeDate).

Our tradition is to purchase a new cookbook every month or two. We enjoy eating unique, adventurous foods, and our growing cookbook collection reflects this. Some months' menus require us to branch out to specialty meat and spice markets in town in search of more obscure ingredients. Things like pomegranate molasses and halloumi cheese have become staples in our house. Most of the time, we love the nontraditional foods we have on date nights. But we've also had some major fails, which are equally as memorable! Our dogs wouldn't even touch the sardine bread pudding dish.

Some weeks don't allow time for an elaborate meal. When schedules are busier, Brett might bring home brisket from a barbecue place and we'll make brisket nachos. Sometimes we keep it simple with an appetizer or dessert.

While we typically enjoy excellent food on our date nights, my favorite part of the time together is the conversations we share. We talk about ways we hope to be better parents. We discuss thought-provoking articles, books, or podcasts. We dream about our future bed and breakfast. We process challenges we're facing. For a few hours on those evenings, we settle into the familiarity of being together and doing something we both love, and we're reminded of God's good plan for our lives.

by Kate Wyss

Kate lives in Colorado with her husband, Brett, and their three kids. She loves books, plants, and sharing good food and conversation with friends and family.

## CONNECTING ACROSS THE MILES

**“I like your necklace, GG. Is it the one Mom gave you for your birthday?”**

My seven-year-old granddaughter asks me this question as our faces come live on the computer screens for our weekly meeting.

“Thanks, Sweetie. Yes, it is! How are you today?” I respond with a big smile, noting her special attention to detail—one of her many gifts.

We then move easily to her report of her “quiet times” since we last met. She opens her notebook and reads off the Scripture verses she selected for the first day.

“What do you think that verse means? How does God want us to show this in our lives?”

I ask her questions to expand her thoughts and understanding of the readings. Often this leads into a life lesson from her own experiences. Or a story that I recall about myself or her mother growing up.

“And I prayed for my teacher, my older sister, my Iowa grandmother, and you and Papa and Sri Lanka, and myself! That was 28 minutes.”

She looks at me through the screen with a beaming smile of accomplishment and moves to the next day’s log of verses and prayer points. When all the newest notebook entries have been reviewed, we read a large section of Scripture together from her book, *My Time with God* (Focus on the Family, 2000), and discuss the questions and applications, and then we pray together before clicking off.

### CHARACTER REFLECTION

Last year I offered to assist my daughter in her homeschool efforts. My son-in-law asked me if I could focus on biblical life application. Online options (like Google Hangouts, FaceTime, and Skype) helped span the distance from Kansas to Colorado and we selected books together for the two oldest granddaughters.

My daughter found a book, *For Girls Only* (Carolyn Larsen, 2009), that leads my 10-year old granddaughter into realistic tween life challenges with a short story in each lesson. Then she assesses her current handling of the character trait or behavior highlighted such as jealousy, fear, forgiveness, anger, or gossiping on a one to five scale. The conversation is rich in her explanation of the chosen number and leads to new awareness of present actions and needed changes.

“I think I am about a four for sharing what bothers me, like with a teacher or my parents. I don’t think anyone could get a five for *always*, do you, GG?”

The author of the book offers four suggestions for “homework” and my granddaughter chooses one to report on next week. Our hour together passes quickly with laughter, sometimes tears, but always with the warmth of connecting over valuable conversation content. We pray for each other before saying goodbye.

### LIFELONG LEARNING

**Even at young ages, my current “students” have taught me new levels of honesty and humility as they confess, pray, and articulate faith in God to care for them in challenging, uncertain times like the recent pandemic.**

Often they acknowledge they have not had many *big* problems in their lives like the people in the Bible or the characters in modern-day stories we read.

“And that is a precious gift to you, having wonderful parents who provide a caring, secure home for you. They don’t have rules and chores for you to make you miserable, right? They want to help you grow into a wise, healthy Jesus follower, a good friend and sister, and a responsible person who shows respect to others. You are blessed.”

These statements are always met with a nod of acceptance but maybe not a cheerful assent if they have been reporting a complaint or recent trouble with parents. My job is to listen and gently nudge these dear girls to God’s ways in handling normal family disagreements. I send them back into the daily challenges with new ideas, encouragement, and hope.

“Look for God everywhere and spend time with him. He wants to speak to you and lead you into peace and right behaviors. He loves you so much. I do too.”

We blow kisses and sign off. I take my own list of prayer points to increase my Christlikeness from our conversations and time spent digging into God’s Word. Learning happens on both sides of the computer screen. God is faithful.

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by Gail Goolsby

*Gail holds master’s degrees in Professional Counseling and Educational Leadership. She has more than 25 years of experience in education and is currently a counselor and ICF-certified life coach. Her award-winning book Unveiled Truth: Lessons I Learned Leading the International School of Kabul details her experience in Afghanistan with challenging applications for all readers. Gail and her pastor husband have been married 41 years and have three grown children, two sons-in-law, and four spunky granddaughters. They live in south-central Kansas, and there really is no place like home.*



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# This Is My Beautiful, Messy Story

**Each one of us has a story.** We're living those stories today. Some of us are on the mountaintop, celebrating and praising God for what He's done. Some of us are in the valley, fighting for each breath, unable to see through the clouds. But many of us are making the great climb. We wake up each morning, lace up our boots, and take the next step.

My story is no different. We wanted a family, but our climb looked different than others. Because of my health, conceiving and carrying a child was not possible. Instead of quitting, we chose a different path up—the path of adoption.

We followed the steps and waited for the call. The first call came—a baby girl! We met her, named her, and loved her. Emma Grace was ours and we were hers. And we celebrated. We'd made it to our first summit. A few days into our celebration we got another call. Only this one wasn't planned. This call was to tell us that the birth mom had changed her mind.

**We were devastated and heartbroken.** It was as if everything we'd prayed for was stripped away and we were left at the beginning. But, because we believed our story wasn't finished, we continued.

Over the next couple of years, we got two more calls. A son and then a daughter. We were back up and our hearts were beginning to heal. Days after our daughter was born, another storm hit; I had had a stroke and was in the hospital fighting for my life. My kidneys had failed and the fight back to health would be a long one. While this wasn't how we thought our story would look, it was the chapter we were in, so we fought.

We were again in the valley—a place we'd been before. A place that had once felt impossible to climb out of, but we'd done it and we knew we could do it again. Nine months later, I received a kidney from my mom and my health was back on track. And so were we.

A few years later, we got another call. A friend told us about a little girl in the foster system who needed a family. She was on oxygen and had many health complications. We asked God, "Are we supposed to be a part of her story?" and after much prayer we knew. We loved her and we brought her home, but we did not name her. She already had a name: Emma. The same name we gave a little girl six years earlier. It was as if the

Lord had redeemed a part of our story, and our family felt complete.

But our story wasn't done.

Twelve years after we got that first call, and 16 years after our wedding, after tests and specialists told us what my body was incapable of, we were indeed pregnant. The impossible had been made possible. At the age of 40 I gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

**So often we think we are the ones writing our stories. We make plans and decide how we think things should go only to find that we do not hold the pen.** A greater author has written our stories—He was with us on the mountaintops and holding us in the valleys. And it's only after we've experienced both that we are able to look back and see the Lord at work even in the midst of our tragedy.

After battling through loss, fear, and uncertainty, I've learned it's the messy parts of our stories that hold the greatest gifts. It's the plot twists and the surprise endings where we experience an unwavering God. And it's because of those parts of our stories that we are able to continue. We can wake up each morning, lace up our boots, and make the climb because we know: we've been here before,

we are not alone, and we will make it back out.

My story looks like many others. There has been both adventure and tragedy. We've felt the sun on our faces as we've reached the top and we have experienced the pain in the shadows. But what I know is that our stories need to be told. In Luke 8:39 Jesus said, "Return home and tell how much God has done for you."

**Jesus wants us to tell our stories—victories and defeats alike. Our stories have the ability to connect and the ability to heal.** Through our stories we reveal what God has done and see how He works, even in the midst of storms.

by Kim Vargas

*Kim lives in Colorado Springs with her husband and four kids. After a diagnosis of lupus at 19, a kidney transplant at 31, and a roller-coaster of a ride growing her family through adoption, Kim's passion is to encourage others to continue toward the things in their hearts even when life throws obstacles in their way. Check out her podcast The Not So Perfect Plan.*

