

Take Advantage of This Stunningly Simple Secret to a Vibrant New Year

In the quiet of a holiday night, I whispered to Matt, “Our tree really is better than anyone else’s.” Of course, I would never say that to people, because it would be rude, but it was true.

Cut by Matt’s own hands in a Montana forest, this tree was ethereal perfection. It was only made better by glass teardrop ornaments and the tinsel Matt hung carefully, one strand at a time, over every branch.

Stunning.

The trick is in the reflection, and I have to admit I dragged my feet on that idea for many years. How could anything compare to the kids’ Popsicle-stick ornaments and the plastic Miss Piggy I had had since I was a child? But finally, he talked me into it, and I tucked the family ornaments away in the crawlspace. Slowly we collected glass and shiny things.

“They need to reflect the lights on the tree,” he said. Sure enough. And in this we find the secret for our fresh new year.

Paul tells the followers of Christ: “So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18a, NLT).

There you have it: Reflection is the thing. In a practical sense, that means we wake up every morning and do what the Lord has specifically shaped us to do. Me with writing Bible studies and teaching Awana, you with your caring or helping or giving or leading or teaching. Through the use of our spiritual gifts, God shows himself to the world.

We just hang out there, each in our own right spot next to the light, and people who pass by catch a twinkling of the glory of God.

So do your thing this year, and do it with all your heart, all your strength, all your brain power.

I tell you, you're gonna shine.

The Life-Choking Depression You Feel Boils Down to One Simple Root

Do you feel like you've lost your joy?

Do you feel like you're flailing in the wind as life pulls you along at warp speed, like you've lost all control?

Do you feel a frustration and emptiness inside that you can't seem to define?

So much of the disappointment and depression, loss of joy and control we experience as believers boil down to one simple truth.

We don't recognize our identity in Christ.

I know a lot is said today about who we are in Christ and recognizing our identity in Him, but I believe that many don't know how to identify with Christ. They don't know how to discover who they are in Him.

That is why over the next few weeks I'll be talking about that very thing. But let's first look at what the Bible says about

our identity in Christ.

It is so easy for Christians today to suffer an identity crisis!

We're told how we should look, how much we should weigh, what we should wear, what kind of hair and makeup we should have.

The media has established an ideal look for men and women and if you don't fit that ideal you're marginalized.

Women should be 5 feet, 7 inches; wear a size 2; have a thigh gap; wear skinny jeans; and have long, straight hair.

If you fit that ideal, you're accepted.

But if you're 5 feet, 2 inches; are a size 14 or more; find that yoga pants tell too much truth about your cellulite, and even your mom-do isn't attractive anymore, you're invisible and unacceptable.

But how does our identity in Christ square up with this ideal?

As a matter of fact, media in general plays a central role in how we feel about ourselves—including social media!

Studies have shown time and again that while social media has done good things, such as connecting long-lost friends and loved ones, too much of it leaves us feeling depressed and empty.

This is partly because it is so one-dimensional.

We see what our friends let us see.

We see a filtered view of their lives, but we see our own life in 3-D, in all of its messy glory, and then compare our messy 3-D image with their filtered, edited, one-dimensional image.

This scenario is just like the ideal that Hollywood has created—starved, operated on, drugged, filtered, edited and

Photoshopped!

If we're not careful, we start to allow things other than God's Word to define us:

- Blogs
- Magazines
- Social media
- Movies and TV

And we begin to define ourselves by our career, ethnicity, economic class or appearance.

Even worse, our past mistakes, disappointments, hurts, rejection and abandonment begin to define us—the fact that we were raped, had an abortion, grew up in a single-parent home or grew up in foster care or an orphanage; we were an abuse victim, used drugs, were an alcoholic or were homeless for a season.

these things and more begin to form an identity for us until all of life is lived from that prism.

But what does the Bible say about our identity?

1. God has no ideal. *"You brought my inner parts into being; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will praise you, for You made me with fear and wonder; marvelous are Your works, and You know me completely. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in secret, and intricately put together in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw me unformed, yet in Your book all my days were written, before any of them came into being" (Ps. 139:13-16).*

The whole idea that there is an ideal physical image is not only a lie, it is a strategy of Satan to keep us in a cycle of striving for what God never intended and depressed because we cannot attain it. God created you the way you are for a purpose and a part of recognizing your identity in Him is

learning to love and accept yourself as He created you.

2. Your past is an event, not your identity. *"So from now on we do not regard anyone according to the flesh. Yes, though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet we do not regard Him as such from now on. Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away. Look, all things have become new. All this is from God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their sins against them, and has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us. We implore you in Christ's stead: Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:16-20).*

When Christ forgives our sins, a miraculous thing takes place.

There is a theological term for it: Justification. Justification is a five-syllable word that literally means "just as if you've never sinned."

That is what Jesus' work on the cross did for us. It completely did away with our past so that it is as though it never happened. And this work of grace needs to be extended to those who hurt us as well!

Just as Christ forgave us to such a degree, so His grace can enable us to forgive others in this same way.

3. Your ethnicity, economic status and career describe your birth and situation; they don't define you. *"You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, and there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26-28).*

Now that we are in Christ, our heritage can no longer be an

excuse for certain behaviors. Sure, you may be of Irish descent, but that doesn't mean that you have no control over your temper. You are now a daughter of God! That is now your heritage, and the fruit of the Spirit should be growing in your life!

Maybe you live on food stamps right now, that doesn't have to define you because you are a daughter of the King of all kings who owns the cattle on a thousand hills! You are the richest woman in the world! Rich in all things that money cannot buy.

Your career is something you do; it's not who you are. Who you are is an ambassador of Christ, regardless of whether you clean toilets or have a corner office. He sent you here to do one thing alone, extend the kingdom of God on Earth.

Plunder hell to populate heaven!

Now do you see why recognizing our identity in Christ is so vital?

Our identity, whether properly recognized as being in Christ or not, clearly becomes the prism through which we live out our everyday lives.

And if we are to live lives that glorify Christ and fulfill the purpose for which He created us, we must recognize and embrace our identity in Jesus Christ. {eoa}

Rosilind Jukic, a Pacific Northwest native, is a missionary living in Croatia and married to her Bosnian hero. Together they live with their two active boys where she enjoys fruity candles, good coffee and a hot cup of herbal tea on a blustery fall evening. Her passion for writing led her to author her best-selling book *The Missional Handbook*. At *A Little R & R* she encourages women to find contentment in what God created them to be. You can also find her at *Missional Call* where she shares her passion for local and global missions. She can also be found at on a regular basis. You can follow her on

10 Invigorating Steps to Feasting on God's Word

I annoyed my little Awana girls.

They gathered around me to say their Bible memory verses last night. I always make them explain what the verse means and talk about how we should obey it or believe it. This makes them nuts, because really they just want to say it as fast as they can and get me to sign my name in their books so they can move on.

When I got an eye roll last night, it reminded me of how we act toward God sometimes. Just kind of going to church and maybe reading the Bible but saying, "Please don't make me slow down and learn this stuff and think about how I'm actually going to do it."

It was ironic. One little girl was learning a verse about how we have a new life in Christ. She was impatient that I was making her talk about what that meant. She didn't know that slowing down and taking time to think about the verse and talking about what it means and how it works in our lives are what open our hearts to the very Source of new life.

I think I need to teach my Awana kids how to meditate on Bible verses, and maybe you'd like to learn how too.

It sounds all mystical, but it's not.

10 Steps to Meditating on the Bible

1. **Read** the verse in its context. Maybe read the whole chapter it's in.
2. **Ask questions** of the verse. Who is talking to whom? What? When? Where? Why? How? Question the text to death.
3. What significant words are **repeated**? They're probably important.
4. Look up the meaning of any words you don't know.
5. What does this verse mean? (Does it mean what you always thought it meant?)
6. Is there anything in the verse you need to **believe**? If so, decide immediately if you will. If believing this verse seems impossible, talk to God about it.
7. Is there anything in the verse you need to **obey**? If so, decide immediately what action you're going to take.
8. Write the verse on a note card. Work on **memorizing** it throughout the day. (You've spent this much time on it. You might as well make it permanent in your thinking.)
9. **Talk about the verse** with a spouse or a kid or a friend.
10. **Pray** through the verse before you go to bed.

That's a long list. Do you feel like my Awana girls? Are you thinking, "Wow, can't I just read the Bible and move on?" The answer is no, not if you want your life to change.

Which of the steps above is a new idea for you?

Shatter Shame as You Pray Through This Book of the

Bible

Is there something in your past that haunts you?

Is there a moment of indiscretion you can't seem to let go of?

Do you struggle with forgiving yourself for things in your past you've already repented for time and time again?

On Monday, I will begin a new series for the month of January called "What Does the Bible Say About Your Identity in Christ?" We'll not only see why it is important that our identity is firmly planted in Jesus Christ, but how we can get there!

It's the how that so many people struggle with today.

I want to share with you a brief story:

The young man was raging with anger. He was just a boy really, but his anger and actions were those of someone older. A bigger boy had been teasing him and in his fun had unwittingly stepped into an area that instantly incited rage.

The fun quickly changed to fighting, and the fighting became a matter of survival for the one doing the teasing. He was warding off fists and kicks when suddenly he was thrown to the ground on his back and out of nowhere a sharp object was pointing at his heart.

Just as quickly, a man in his early 20s was standing over both of them and had the attacker by the arm, preventing him from stabbing the boy on the ground. "What are you doing?" he yelled at the attacker. "Stop this now!"

He pulled the attacker off the boy who had been teasing him. The 20-year-old was a volunteer police officer; he showed his badge and told the young man he was under arrest. The boy who had been doing the teasing jumped up and ran home.

The volunteer policeman and the attacker began walking down the street. "I am not going to cuff you or take you to the station. Instead, I am going take you to another office, and you will receive a different kind of sentencing."

They continued walking and talking. The boy shared his struggle with anger, and the officer spoke calmly and compassionately.

Instead of hearing the yelling and demeaning words he was used to, the troubled boy heard words of care and encouragement. The walk and conversation continued for a lengthy time, and to the boy's surprise, he and the officer entered a YMCA building.

The officer took the boy to the YMCA manager's office and sentenced him to one month of weekly attendance of YMCA activities.

The officer never made an official record of the attempted murder.

This volunteer police officer's act of mercy along with the kindness and positive Christian atmosphere of the YMCA were the initial steps that would lead this 10-year-old boy to life transformation.

Six years later, after this same boy gave way to another explosion of anger, a Christian leader showed him a similar act of mercy. This act of mercy led that boy to a full encounter with Almighty God, which brought him to repentance and a born-again experience.

That boy was my dad. You can read the whole post here: ["When Mercy Triumphed."](#)

You may wonder how someone could ever live with the guilt of knowing they almost took another person's life with their own hands.

Well, that is exactly what we're going to be looking at in January—the truth that we don't have to live with guilt, condemnation, our past mistakes and failures or our past hurts and disappointments.

That is why I chose the book of Ephesians as our January 30 Day Prayer Challenge.

It says so much about our identity and our role in every part of society as His children.

I hope you'll join me this month as we discover our identity in Christ and as we learn to live life through that lens, something that will truly set us free! {eoa}

Rosilind Jukic, a Pacific Northwest native, is a missionary living in Croatia and married to her Bosnian hero. Together they live with their two active boys where she enjoys fruity candles, good coffee and a hot cup of herbal tea on a blustery fall evening. Her passion for writing led her to author her best-selling book *The Missional Handbook*. At *A Little R & R* she encourages women to find contentment in what God created them to be. You can also find her at *Missional Call* where she shares her passion for local and global missions. She can also be found at on a regular basis. You can follow her on Facebook, Pinterest and Google +.

2 Foolproof Ways to Burst Out of Your Spiritual Winter

The in-between times can often be one of the most challenging. The Christmas celebrations are over. The New Year is not quite here. For many of us, long weeks or months of winter weather

lie ahead.

The emotional letdown after a holiday can be difficult. Perhaps your expectations were met, but you're still wondering, "Is that all there is?" Or you're trying to take a breath after a whirlwind of activity. Or you may be relieved that the holiday season is just about over.

Holidays and celebrations are good. We need them. God directed His people to set aside times for gathering together, celebrating the past and looking forward to the future.

But we don't live there all the time. We can't. Our human psyche was not built to sustain that level of intensity.

So we're left with "What now?" It's a very long time until Christmas next year. How do we go about living today, tomorrow, and the next day? How do we keep going in the in-between times?

The End of the Beginning

In 1942, after one of the most challenging battles in Britain during World War II, Winston Churchill famously said, "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

We don't know how close we truly are to the final end. But we know we're closer than when Winston Churchill said that famous line. We're closer than we were last Christmas. And we may be closer than we realize. For us, it's certainly beyond "the end of the beginning." Many believe—perhaps rightly—that we are at "the beginning of the end."

It's possible we have spent our very last Christmas on Earth.

And when it comes down to it, I'd be fine with that. 2016 had enough trouble for all of us. 2017 holds both promise and danger. But if this is the year God puts an end to this whole earthly mess? Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing?

What to Do in the In-Between

Since we know the end of the story, how are we to live in 2017 and however long this world continues?

Among all the recommendations for how to make 2017 your best year ever, there are two things I believe are most important:

1. Pay attention to the everyday stuff.

The little things matter. What you eat for breakfast. Brushing your teeth. Kissing your spouse or children. Balancing your checkbook. Reading an educational or inspirational book. The ways in which you are generous or kind. Going to church. Reading your Bible. Spending some quality alone-time with God.

Success in your physical health, your mental health, your work life, your relationships or your spiritual life will not come by accident. Success comes as a result of the thousands of little habits you nurture, the countless little decisions you make on a daily basis.

Do you want an area of your life to be better in 2017? Focus on a few daily quality actions, and turn them into habits.

2. Enter the presence of God often.

You cannot spend time in God's presence and remain unchanged. Whatever part of your character or life needs growth, restoration or transformation, God's presence is where that happens.

Make entering the presence of God a habit. Do it often by yourself. Do it regularly with your spouse or family. Do it systematically with other believers.

Do you wonder how to do that? God has invited us to enter His presence boldly. It's a skill you can develop. Here are some helpful ways to do that. {eoa}

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Mountain-Tossing Faith Begins With This Small Step

The boxes, crumpled wrapping paper, bags and aluminum foil that once covered leftovers are out on the curb ready to be recycled or thrown in the dump. Once again, you're mad at yourself for too much money spent and too much food eaten. You know it's time to push the reset button on your life, if you just had the faith to believe it actually exists.

That reset button does exist, but it requires more than the simple push of a button. It requires acceptance, ownership and action regarding the changes required. It also requires faith. Without faith to begin the change process, nothing different will ever happen. I can give you a 100 percent guarantee that if you do nothing different, next year you will get the same results you did this year.

Change, though, is possible. Overspending and overeating seem to go together or they always did in my life. Right now, though, I am counting my blessings with over 260 pounds gone from my body, and as of this year, my husband and I are debt-free.

Debt

As most Americans do, we found ourselves deeply in debt. I

wasn't too worried, though. It seemed everyone we knew also had a house payment, one or two car payments and too many credit card payments.

What's the big deal? I thought. We can't take stuff with us and we can't take debt with us. Might as well enjoy it while we are here.

The problem is, though, debt, like the excess pounds on my body, kept me in bondage. When I was in debt, I was in bondage to the bank, the credit card companies and whatever job I had. If God said, "Move," or "Do this," it couldn't obey, because I was tied to the promise of paying off things I had bought.

Weight

In addition, I weighed 430 pounds. There were times I could barely move, and yet I couldn't seem to turn down desserts, pasta, potatoes or homemade breads. I was definitely in bondage to my indulgences on both fronts—food and stuff.

Weight comes off one pound at a time, just as debt comes off one dollar at a time. However, it's not a simple process. I didn't lose an extreme amount of weight overnight, and we did not get debt-free overnight.

Both processes, though, did start with a reset, a time of intentional surrender to the job ahead of me. Then the process to walk out my journey became acceptance, ownership and action.

Acceptance

Denial is the biggest enemy of change. I continued to live with my head buried in the sand until something major happened to jolt me out of the rut I'd made of my life.

My wakeup call came with being told by a cardiac surgeon I had five years to live if I didn't lose weight. That was the impetus to begin my change journey. For the first time, I was

face-to-face with the reality of my situation.

In the same way, I lived in denial about debt, robbing Peter to pay Paul, paying one credit card off with the other. My wake-up call there came hearing Dave Ramsey say that debt is bondage. I realized we couldn't be free to fully serve God if we were in debt. Giving up things for God became an easy choice.

Using the money we saved to build a well in Kenya, provide food for those less fortunate in our city, fund relief supplies to areas hit by disaster, provide monthly support to missionaries and be available to meet needs God shows us became more of a joy than buying a new outfit.

Ownership

Acceptance of my issues was the biggest step in overcoming them. Ownership, then, means identifying exactly how I contributed to the issue. I had to come to the point where I realized I am a sugar addict.

Not only that, I had to realize things and stuff do not define me. The car I drive doesn't define me. It just needs to be practical and get me where I need to go. The clothes I wear do not define me.

It was a huge reality check to go through my closet and realize how much money I'd spent on clothes I'd only worn once. I owned the fact that I am also a spendaholic. Then, I began the process of giving things away. Decluttering my life became a joy.

Action

The key, though, that got me out of debt and into a somewhat normal weight range is action. Without action, no change occurs. Without action, I am just a well-educated person who is still in bondage to food and money.

Action means I begin to act against my addictions. I begin to put plans in place to change my habits. It's more than talk; it's strategic daily steps to walk out of bondage to the things I have willfully allowed to capture me.

Faith

These days, the No. 1 question I'm asked is "How did you lose all that weight?" The answer is "One pound at a time." It starts, though, with faith in God's leadership.

Remember when the parents of a boy who was demon-possessed brought the child to the disciples to be cured? They tried to cast the demon out, but couldn't.

Then Jesus rebuked the demon and the boy was "cured instantly" (Matt. 17:18, AMPC). When the disciples asked why they couldn't drive out the demon, Jesus didn't mince words.

"'You don't have enough faith,'" Jesus told them. 'I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it would move. Nothing would be impossible'" (Matt. 17:20).

It takes just a little faith to know that when we grab hold of Jesus, He will lead us to take the right actions. He will show us how. He will teach us everything we need to know (see John 14:26). Our job then is to listen and follow (see John 10:27).

Mountain-Moving Faith

Mountains don't have to move in an instant, but they do need to begin moving at some point. My mountain of flesh started to move when I surrendered my sugar addiction to Jesus. Our debt began to move when I realized stuff money can buy no longer defines me.

I pushed reset on my life and it changed with God's help. Yours can, too. It only takes faith to believe He will not only help you but is waiting eagerly to help you move the

mountains out of your life.

Don't wait to answer Him. His Sweet Grace is available to you right now. He will show you how to make that Sweet Change He so longs for you to make.

He wants you to step out of the prison you've created.

"In [this] freedom Christ has made us free [and completely liberated us]; stand fast then, and do not be hampered and held ensnared and submit again to a yoke of slavery [which you have once put off]" (Gal. 5:1 AMPC). {eoa}

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4 Power-Packed Questions To Prepare You for a Productive 2017

I have chosen my one word for 2017.

Do you choose a word for each year?

My word for 2016 was "position," and although I tend to be very critical of myself and my accomplishments, looking back, I feel I did quite well positioning myself to be more open to the Lord and to those around me.

But I feel that there is still so much more room for improvement.

I don't know if you're like me, but I find that I can do one or two things well. Add any more plates to this juggling act, and we have a mess on the floor.

But as a wife and mom who works at home and leads an online ministry, who is trying to get healthy and stay healthy—well, let's just say that there are a lot of plates to spin here.

I know I can balance them all and balance them well. I just need to identify what are the priorities in each of these areas and then focus on them.

Here are some questions I'm asking myself this week.

1. What do I spend the majority of my time doing? Starting today, I will jot down everything I do during the day and how long I spend doing it. I want to account for every minute so I can see where I spend the majority of my time.

You see, I have a sneaking suspicion that I spend a lot of time doing mindless things that are really not important at all. The worst thing about these time-wasters is they prevent us from doing what's important in a timely manner, so the time we could spend relaxing, we spend rushing around instead.

2. What is my "black hole"? We all have a black hole, and it's the distraction we choose to engage in when we're trying to avoid doing something we know we should do.

Actually, I know the answer to this question already: My Facebook timeline. Anytime I know I need to do something and I don't want to do it, I distract myself by scrolling through my Facebook timeline. It's time to kill my feed.

3. What are the top priorities in each area of my responsibilities? I will sit down and list the top three priorities in each area of responsibility I have and create

actionable steps to make sure I accomplish them each day.

I think many times I don't accomplish what is important because I am not even sure what is truly important.

How do we determine what is a priority and what is only just a really good idea? The answer is in our vision. What is the vision for our family? Our vision should act as a sieve to filter out what is not an actual priority.

4. Am I saying yes to those things God hasn't meant for me to do? It is so easy to say yes to all of the good things that come our way without reflecting on whether or not we actually should take on these responsibilities.

In her book *The Best Yes*, Lysa TerKeurst explains that saying no to the good enables us to say yes to the best.

Sometimes, though, it isn't clear to us whether or not this opportunity is a good yes or a best yes. That is why I created what I call "My Decision Pathway."

This printable worksheet takes you through several questions that help you determine whether or not this opportunity is part of God's plan for you or not.



- Are you weighed down by too much responsibility?
- Do you often feel stressed-out because you have too much to do?
- Is your family in a constant cycle of running around and never really getting anywhere?
- Are you facing a decision for which you are not sure how to answer?

The Decision Pathway worksheet is a three-step form that helps guide you through the process of making a decision that is in line with your personal and family vision and mission.

By asking leading questions that help you process whether or not this decision will help guide you to make decisions that promote your call, you will be able to easily identify those responsibilities that will end being deadweight on your life and prevent you from doing those things God has destined for you. {eo}

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Your First Step in Radical, Immediate Obedience

“You want me to go where?” That would have been my response to a dream to take my family and move to a weird place where there were foreign gods, idols and all kinds of evil practices. Joseph, though, didn’t react that way.

We’re Outta Here

It happened right after the wise men hightailed it out of Bethlehem to avoid Herod: “Now when they departed, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word. For Herod will seek the

young Child to kill Him'" (Matt. 2:13).

The next line indicates Joseph didn't hesitate. Even though it was still night, he got up, took Jesus and Mary and left for Egypt. Think about that for a minute. They had traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a journey of 80 miles.

Trip from Nazareth

Most sources agree it would take from four days to a week of travel to go that far. They only took necessities with them. They knew, though, that the baby would be born in Bethlehem, so they likely carried carpenter's tools with them for Joseph to use to ply his trade once there.

They had been living in Bethlehem for a year or more. They had probably acquired some items to make life easier. But now Joseph, without hesitating, hastily leaves. He has money now, though. Remember the gold from the wise men?

God provided for His Son before the need became apparent.

Egypt By Night

The journey to Egypt was about 65 miles. It doesn't say how they traveled. Perhaps they still had the donkey some believe they used to travel to Bethlehem in the first place.

Whether Joseph thought about it or not, traveling by night was a great way to move about undetected. Egypt was probably the last place Herod would think a Jew would go. So even though it was a pagan country, it was a safe haven for God's Son.

Joseph came into this gig as the Messiah's adopted father, totally unaware of what would be required of him. It had been a wild and crazy ride to this point—angels, dreams, shepherds, prophet, prophetess and Magi from a foreign land, laden with gifts fit for royalty.

I'd say by this point in time, God's leading in his life had

become something Joseph expected. It was an everyday thing. Leaving for Egypt was a no-brainer for this young man of God.

Herod's Rampage

In the meantime, Herod killed all the male children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old and under. He had calculated the age of the birth from the information the wise men had told him about when they had seen the star (see Matt. 2:16).

The young family stayed in Egypt until Herod died. The time frame is not spelled out in Scripture. Some sources say it might have been months, or it could have been years.

However long it was, Joseph and Mary knew their primary job was being Jesus' earthly caretakers. They were not surprised when the angel appeared to Joseph in another dream and told him to go back to Israel because "those who sought the young Child's life are dead" (Matt. 2:20b).

Another Dream

One more time, Joseph receives a dream and is directed where to reside. "Nevertheless, being warned by God in a dream, he withdrew to the region of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'" (Matt. 2:22b-23).

Although Joseph was Jesus' adopted father, it's apparent His real daddy was directing His Son's life from the very beginning. This baby had a destiny that would not be fulfilled until He reached the proper age.

God's Extreme Love

God went to extreme efforts to pave the way for His Son. Of course Jesus was special. There is no denying that. However,

are we not all children of God? He has the same love for each of us that He had for Jesus.

I know that because He loved us so much that if you and I believe in, cling to and rely on Him we will not perish, come to destruction or be lost but have eternal or everlasting life (see John 3:16, AMP).

Then Jesus went one step further and let us know that His desire is to give us “life, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows]” (John 10:10b, AMP).

It’s further emphasized when Paul says God will “do superabundantly more than all that we dare ask or think [infinitely beyond our greatest prayers, hopes, or dreams], according to His power that is at work within u” (Eph. 3:20b, AMP).

Like A Butterfly

God came to earth so we could soar, like the butterfly. Most people who know me know I love the analogy of the butterfly. I used to crawl on the ground like caterpillars eating everything in sight. Then I went through metamorphosis and lost 260 pounds. Now I feel like I am able to soar with an entirely new perspective. I was changed, not of my own making, but by tapping into God’s strength.

I have two video courses on my website that were some of my favorites to do. One is Metamorphosis and the other is Chrysalis. Metamorphosis is all about the process it takes to begin and go through lifestyle change. The major part of that change happens in the chrysalis, the surrender stage, where everything not in tune with our destiny has to be removed.
{eoa}

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Grace Study Guide: Practical Steps to Lose Weight and Overcome Sugar Addiction and Sweet Freedom. *Get a free chapter of her memoir on her blog at Teresa Shields . Connect with her there or on her Facebook page or Twitter.*

One Easy Way to Prepare for the Greatest Year of Your Life

If you'd like something different to think about this week and next, choose initiative.

Especially if you'll be with others, and you want to be a blessing, choose initiative. Talk with your children so they'll do the same.

Initiative is recognizing and doing what needs to be done before being asked. Initiative is action. It's helpful. Purposeful. Directed. About others. Tasks to bless people.

Initiative is "just do it" now.

Choose to see what you can do for the people you're with. Have ears to hear. Help your children see and hear in these ways, too. Talk about this idea. Model the behavior. Reward it with "Thanks!"

Picture your family at your mom's for dinner. She's cooking when you and your children arrive, and the table isn't set. There are maybe four possibilities for your children:

- They don't notice the need and do their own thing. This is not good.

- They pay some attention to their grandmother and ask, “Do you need any help?” This is good.
- They ask, “May I set the table for you?” This is better.
- They know where the dishes are and set the table, knowing it needs to be done. This is best. This is initiative.

You arrive home with a car full of groceries.

- Adults and children who are home pretend not to notice they could help. This is not good.
- Someone yells from another room, “Do you need any help?” This is good.
- Someone asks, “May I help you bring the bags in from the car?” This is better.
- Someone stops what he or she is doing, meets you in the garage and carries as much as possible into the house. This is best. This is initiative.

Using initiative honors others. It’s efficient. It decreases arguments. (Imagine not having to declare, “I could use some help in here” ever again.) Initiative can increase peace and joy.

Initiative feels good. A few minutes ago, while I was working on this post, my brother needed to locate the serial number on the back of his TV cable box. He moved it with one hand and had his phone in his other hand, talking with the tech person who was helping him. There wasn’t much light in the area, and I knew the numbers would be small. So, without being asked, I stopped writing, put down my laptop, and stood up and walked toward him as I turned on my phone’s flashlight. I positioned the light so Dave could see the numbers. He was able to read them for the person on the phone. He was grateful. So was I.

I’m not special. You can do this, too. So can your kids. It feels good. It is good. It is initiative. {eoa}

Dr. Kathy Koch is the author of *Screens & Teens: Connecting*

with Our Kids in a Wireless World.

Kick Doubt in the Teeth With This Encouraging Prayer Truth

Have you ever passed over a prayer request because you felt that perhaps your prayers won't help? I want to stir your faith to believe that yes, your prayers do make a difference.

James 5:16 claims, *"Confess your faults to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much."* When true believers in Jesus Christ pray words of faith, they cause situations to change. First John 5:14-15 states, *"This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. So if we know that He hears whatever we ask, we know that we have whatever we asked of Him."*

I shared two urgent prayer requests on social media. One was for a little girl who was rushed to the hospital with high fevers and severe seizures. The other request was from a woman who needed prayer for healing of a relationship between her and her adult daughter who needs salvation and healing. This woman was not able to even start to minister to her daughter because of a broken relationship. I shared the needs of these people with you, with examples of faith-filled prayers to pray. Together we prayed in faith, and both came back with good reports.

The little girl was released and sent back home within an hour. The family says this is nothing short of a miraculous touch from the Lord, and they credit this healing to

everyone's prayers. With the other situation, the mother wrote back and said that her daughter's spirit has opened up to her once again and she can now start to reach out to her daughter's needs, and she said to thank everyone for their prayers.

I want to encourage you, regardless of the situation, reach out to those who believe and ask them to pray. And for those of you who are called upon to pray, don't lose heart, your faith-filled prayers do make a difference. They accomplish great things for the glory of our God. {eo}

Becky Dvorak is a prophetic healing evangelist and the *Destiny Image* author of *DARE to Believe* and *Greater Than Magic* and soon to be released, *The Healing Creed*. Visit her at .