Short & Sweet
Short Stories with a Message
Volume I

By Katherine Loop
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Dedicated to my piano students
And to all the other special
Young people in my life.
With love and prayers.
Lieutenant Springer walked as fast as he dared through the military camp. He entered the comfortable house General McMellan occupied, thumped up the large staircase, turned the corner, and knocked at the door. Springer’s heart beat wildly as he opened the door and saluted the general.

The general glanced at the clock on the wall. Springer was right on time. “Have a seat,” McMellan said matter-of-factly, as a man accustomed to giving orders. “I have a letter here from you begging to be allowed to do something—anything—for me. Did you write this?”

“Yes, sir. After you saved my life the other week, I’d do anything for you, Sir, even walk around the world and back,” replied Springer emphatically.

A slight smile played on the general’s rough face. “Well, I called you here because I do have a few important tasks that need done, if you really want to do them.”

“Oh, yes, sir, I’ll do anything for you,” repeated Springer. He could hardly wait to find out what great task he’d be assigned. Perhaps he’d be sent on a dangerous spy mission. Or maybe he’d lead a battalion into battle. Or then again, maybe he’d deliver important telegrams between the army leaders.

“Well, then, you can march right down to the army hospital and haul some fresh water from the creek for them to use.” After stating this, the general turned back to his papers in silence.

Springer was stunned. Carry water—why, that was a servant’s job! “Couldn’t you send a servant, sir, or maybe a private?” Springer finally stammered.

“But you said you’d do anything for me, Lieutenant. Will you not carry water?” asked the general.

Springer squirmed uncomfortably. “Isn’t there anything else?”

McMellan thought for a moment. “You can help the cook on KP duty tonight if you’d prefer.”

KP duty! Springer shuddered. “Isn’t there anything else I can do for you?” Springer whispered.

“There may be, when you finish those tasks.”

Springer was silent for a moment. “I’d rather not haul water or clean dishes, sir.”

“Oh? Well, then, I suppose you can leave, Lieutenant. You came in here volunteering to do anything for me. If I had asked you to lead a battalion for me, you would have eagerly fulfilled my wishes. Why, then, when I ask you to perform a simple task will you not cheerfully do it for me? Were my requests too demanding for you? Or was your pride insulted? Whether I had more renown tasks planned for you or not I will not tell you now, but I will tell you that he who will not serve in small things will not serve at all.”

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.” Colossians 3:23

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’” Matthew 25:21
Alyssa looked around her in awe. Just the other day she had been a homeless girl, living off the streets and begging for each meal. Today, she was a princess, living in the palace and surrounded by finery that dazzled her eyes.

Was it all a dream? No, it couldn’t be a dream, for in her pocket Alyssa carried a copy of the adoption papers, sealed with the king’s very own signet ring. It was true. The king had adopted her!

Alyssa’s first few days at the palace were simply indescribable. She couldn’t think of anything else except the king and his incredible love. The knowledge that she was a princess brought a smile to her face and caused her little feet to patter about with joy.

When people said nasty things to her (which many of the courtiers did), she simply smiled at them. What did it matter what they thought? The king loved her. When she had to do tasks she didn’t like, she did them with a cheerful heart. After all, she was a child of the king!

Alyssa had one driving passion—to learn everything she could about her new Father, the king. In her eagerness, she managed to learn from everyone, even the grumpy butler and the disgruntled chef. What some people would have viewed as annoyances or mere chores, she viewed as opportunities.

When the maid quit unexpectedly, Alyssa, instead of feeling upset with the maid, thought to herself, “What a wonderful opportunity to do something little for my father’s people!” She eagerly offered to dust the parlor. As she ran her dust rag over every object in the room, she let the objects themselves teach her about her father. The little porcelain lamb reminded her of her father’s gentle, shepherd-like care, while the ornate clock reminded her of something she had read somewhere about how the king made all things beautiful in his time.

“Oh, Myra,” Alyssa remarked that evening to her governess. “It seems there’s always something exciting happening here!”

Myra smiled at her little charge. “Oh really? What’s happened today?”

Alyssa smiled. “Why, I got to dust the parlor today! And the cook let me mop the kitchen floor. Just think—I had the privilege of helping out in the king’s kitchen! And while I worked, the cook told me stories of the king’s kindness and love. What could be more exciting?”

After only a few weeks at the palace, however, Alyssa’s attitude began to change. She ceased to delight in being the king’s daughter. While she still did everything she possibly could to serve him, she didn’t do all her tasks with the same joy and delight. She began viewing things as mere chores that needed done. She no longer awoke each morning looking forward to another day in her father’s house. Her feet no longer pattered everywhere with their old joy and eagerness.

One day Alyssa sank sullenly into one of the velvet backed chairs in her bedroom. She was feeling sorry for herself, and she couldn’t figure out why. She noticed her governess, Myra, standing near by. “Oh, Myra, if only something exciting would happen!”
Myra looked at Alyssa in surprise. Was this the same little girl that just a few weeks ago couldn’t contain her excitement? Her heart filled with compassion. How could she help Alyssa see the truth again? “Alyssa, something exciting is happening,” she said quietly.

“Whatever do you mean?” Alyssa asked, looking up in surprise.

Myra smiled. “Why, there’s the parlor to be dusted and the cook to be helped and—”

“But that’s not exciting!” Alyssa interrupted.

“Oh, but it was! Don’t you remember the joy you once had in every little task? My dear child, you don’t need something exciting to happen—you just need to start rejoicing in the king again and viewing everything as an opportunity.”

Alyssa looked at Myra in surprise. She was right! Her attitude, not her circumstances, needed changed.

“Thank you, Myra,” she whispered, standing on her tiptoes to give her governess a little kiss before pattering off with a song in her heart once again.

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“What has happened to all your joy?”

Galatians 4:15a
Don’t You Believe?

Alyssa had been a homeless orphan for as long as she could remember—that is, until the king himself had adopted her. The king had taken her off the street, made her his very own daughter, and given her a place to live in his palace.

Alyssa now had nothing about which to fear or worry. Her father the king was not only powerful, but also wise and good, and he personally oversaw every detail of his children’s care.

But strange as it may sound, Alyssa kept forgetting about her father’s care. Her governess, Myra, found her one morning curled up on the couch, fretting and wondering how she would obtain her breakfast. Alyssa had already been out on the streets that morning trying to find food, and had failed miserably.

Myra shook her head at her little charge. “Alyssa, dear,” she said in a gently reproachful voice. “Don’t you believe your father is the king?”

“Of course I do!” Alyssa replied quickly.

“But why are you worrying? As the king, your father is perfectly capable of supplying your needs.”

Alyssa looked up in surprise. She hadn’t thought of that before! “You’re right, Myra,” she declared. “I won’t be so foolish again.”

However, only a few hours later Alyssa’s countenance was again downtrodden. She had just been downstairs talking with some of the other children. As she had listened to them talk about all their plans for their future, she had begun to wonder about her own future. And as she wondered, she worried.

Bumping into Myra on the stairs, she unburdened her heart to her wise governess. Myra sighed patiently as she listened. “Alyssa,” she began as soon as she could get a word in edgewise. “Don’t you believe the king’s word to you?”

“Why, of course I do!” Alyssa wondered why her governess would ask such a strange question.

“Then why are you worrying about the future? He has promised to take care of you now and forevermore. Why, he has your future all figured out. Trust him to unfold his plans one step at a time.”

Alyssa knew that her governess was right. She just needed to trust her father. “Thank you, Myra,” she whispered. With a light heart, she headed down the stairs to greet guests that had just arrived, never dreaming that within a few minutes she would once again forget about her father’s perfect love and care.

The guests turned out to be some children of the noblemen who lived next to the castle. They had come to invite Alyssa to a grand party they were throwing the next evening. Alyssa’s eyes grew wide at the prospect of attending the party. She could hardly wait!

Her hopes were cruelly dashed a few minutes later, however, when she found out her carriage was broken.

Alyssa broke into tears. She wanted to go to the party so badly! All her life she had dreamt of attending a party like this. Now she would miss out on all the fun.
Myra seemed to understand exactly what was going through her mind. “Alyssa,” she said gently, “Don’t you believe that your father is the king, and that as the king, he can do whatever he wishes?”

“Of course I do,” Alyssa replied, a bit crossly. “What does that have to do with the party and the broken carriage?”

“Oh, Alyssa, can’t you see? Your father could order you another carriage very easily if he wanted you to go to the party.”

Alyssa looked at Myra in surprise. She had never thought of that.

“And don’t you believe that your father knows all about the party and the carriage?”

Alyssa nodded. Her father’s letters to her assured her that he knew all about everything that happened to her.

“And don’t you believe that the king loves you perfectly and knows what is best?” Myra continued.

Alyssa nodded again. With sudden understanding, she exclaimed, “Then I shouldn’t complain or feel sorry for myself, should I? I should get up and rejoice, knowing my father knows about what has happened and thought it best for me not to go to the party?”

Myra nodded. “Yes, dear. That’s exactly what I mean.”

Happy once more, Alyssa scampered off to help the cook make dinner. Oh, how good it felt to simply trust her father again!

But a conversation she had in the kitchen soon set her to worrying once more.

“You mean the king simply adopted you?” the question came from Elena, one of the neighboring children who had come over to the kitchen to help out.

“Yes, isn’t it wonderful?” Alyssa replied, love and delight radiating from her countenance.

Elena nodded her assent. “But I say, Alyssa, you must try to earn the love the king has bestowed on you. After all, if you misbehave and aren’t a good princess, the king might stop loving you.”

The thought that she must earn the king’s love or do something to keep it had never occurred to Alyssa. She devoted the remainder of the afternoon to being the perfect princess. The more she tried to behave like a princess, however, the more she seemed to behave like a beggar. She spoke incorrectly, walked incorrectly, held a fork incorrectly—the list went on and on.

Myra found her a few hours later hiding in her closet, too ashamed to show her face to anyone. The kind governess gently gathered the sobbing child into her arms. “Alyssa, dear, don’t you believe that the king loves you?”

“Yes, Myra, I do, but—”

“But nothing. The king himself has promised to never leave or forsake you. You didn’t do anything to earn his love, and you can’t do anything to make him love you more or less. Don’t you believe that?”

“Yes, but—”
“No buts. Live like you believe your father. Serve and seek him out of love, not to try to earn or deserve his love. Now,” Myra added with a smile. “I think it’s time to begin your lessons for the day. Dry your eyes and open up your books.”

Alyssa opened up her lesson books willingly enough. After a few minutes, however, she grew bored. “Myra, do I have to keep studying?” she complained. Why did she have to learn all this stuff anyway?

Myra looked up from her knitting at her little charge. “Alyssa dear, don’t you believe that the king knows what is best for you?”

“How of course I do! But what does that have to do with my studies?”

“Why, child, the king has personally planned your days.”

Alyssa was quiet for a minute as she let those words sink in. If she really believed the king knew best and planned her days, what right had she to ever complain? A smile lighted her face once more. Oh, why did she keep forgetting her father? Would she never learn to live like she believed him?

**********

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.”
Ephesians 5:8
Whose Servant?

Bartholomew’s eyes fondly followed his master’s every move. How he loved his master! After all, his master had taken him—a broke man unable to pay a myriad of debts—and had made him a part of his family. For years, his master had cared for him and provided for his every need. When Bartholomew’s term of servitude had expired several years ago, Bartholomew had begged to be allowed to stay. Following the custom of his day, he had become a bondservant servant willingly indentured for life.

“Bartholomew,” his master’s voice instantly brought Bartholomew to attention. His master continued, “I will be leaving everything to your care for a few weeks. However, I’ll be in my office the entire time. Come talk with me often.”

Bartholomew nodded, both proud and overwhelmed by the responsibility before him. At first, Bartholomew immediately deferred any worry or problem that arose to his master.

Soon, however, Bartholomew began to forget his position as servant. He began to try to solve the household problems on his own. As a result, the joy he had hitherto known began to be replaced by a constant irritation at the things and people around him. He was upset with the cook for burning dinner. Didn’t she know better? He was disgruntled with the store for not having the items he wanted. Didn’t they know that he needed those things?

The comments from some of his other servants didn’t help. Isaac demanded a new dinner time. Martha insisted that the living room needed new curtains. Anxious to please everyone and look like the ideal overseer, Bartholomew attempted to fulfill all these requests.

One day, Bartholomew realized that he simply could not continue living like this. He felt completely overwhelmed. He knew he needed to see his master again.

His master’s face lit up with joy when he saw Bartholomew. “Ah, Bartholomew, I’ve been waiting for you.”

Bartholomew sank wearily into a nearby chair. “It’s a mess, Master,” he began, unsure even how to begin telling his master of all the household worries.

His master nodded. “I know.”

Bartholomew looked up in surprise. “You do?”

“Yes, I know all about it. I know each and every detail. Bartholomew, I think you have forgotten something. Is this house yours?”

Bartholomew looked up in surprise. “Why, no,” he finally stammered. “It’s your house. Why, I don’t even own one thing. I gratefully put everything in your hands years ago when I became your bondservant.”

The master nodded. “Exactly. Now, if you don’t own anything, do you have anything to worry about? Can’t you trust me to take care of everything? Have I ever failed you yet?”

Understanding suddenly flashed through Bartholomew’s mind. The house, the servants, the things—they were all his master’s worry! And his master was perfectly capable of taking care of everything.
Bartholomew realized that he had been worrying for no reason. But what about the other servants’ comments? How should he handle them? “Master, I still don’t understand. Martha says—”

“Whose servant are you?”

The question took Bartholomew by surprise. “Why I’m your servant, but—”

“If you are my servant, not Martha’s, then you do not need to worry about what Martha says or thinks. She is not your master. Oh, Bartholomew, I love you as my own son. Don’t play to others. Don’t take the household worries on your own shoulders. Simply bring everything before me and let me handle it all.”

Bartholomew’s face relaxed into a smile for the first time in weeks. He was free again—his master had everything under control.

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“For I am Your servant.”
Psalm 143:12b
Even in the Darkness

Jill gasped with wonder as she reached the mountaintop and caught sight of the view. There in the distance, she could faintly see her future home glistening in the sunlight. For a few moments, Jill completely forgot about everything else except the beautiful scene before her.

“Oh, Father, it’s so beautiful,” Jill finally managed to whisper.

Her father smiled as he placed his hand on his daughter’s shoulders. “Jill, the path that takes you to your future home may get difficult at times. But remember—no matter what happens on the way, I will never leave or forsake you. I promise to bring you safely home.”

Jill soaked in these words in silence. She felt too happy to speak. One day she would get to live with her father in that beautiful home! And her father had promised to be with her and guide her—how could she keep from being happy with such a promise?

After a few minutes, Jill’s father started down the path. With one last look at the beautiful scene, Jill turned and followed him. She wondered why her father had told her to keep thinking about her future home and his promise to never leave her. Her heart felt so light and happy, and the thought of her future home so completely consumed her, that she wondered how she could ever forget what she had just seen.

As time wore on, however, the sun began to sink behind the horizon, and the path Jill and her father were walking began to descend into a briery thicket. Jill suddenly found herself stumbling through thick brush in a growing twilight.

Soon the darkness had grown so great and the thicket so thick that Jill could not see which way to go! Confusion and panic seized her heart. She felt like giving up and abandoning her journey—anything to get out of this terrible thicket!

Although Jill looked around for her father, she could not see him. She began to wonder if he had abandoned her or no longer loved her. Overwhelmed, Jill sank onto a log and burst into tears. She couldn’t stand this! “Oh, Father, where are you? What is happening?” she sobbed.

To her great surprise and delight, she felt a reassuring arm on her shoulder and heard a voice say, “I’m right here, Jill.”

Jill looked up, but she still could not see anything. “I—I can’t see you. Everything is so—so dark.” Jill shuddered as she spoke. The sun had now completely vanished behind the horizon.

“I know you can’t see me, but I’m right next to you,” Jill’s father assured her. “I told you I would never leave you—no matter what you go through or do. Have you forgotten what I showed you and said to you on the mountaintop?”

Jill hung her head. She had forgotten, hadn’t she? “Yes, I guess I have,” she confessed with shame.

“My darling daughter, remember that I am here in this dark thicket just like I was up there on the mountain. Even though you cannot see me, I am always with you. Get up and press forward again.”
“But I don’t know which way to go!” Jill saw no way she could possibly navigate through dense brush around her.

“I know the way, and I will direct you,” Jill’s father explained.

“But what if I make a wrong step or mishear your directions?” Jill asked. She felt so afraid of going the wrong way that she simply wanted to stay still and do nothing. Her father’s next words caught her completely by surprise.

“My dear daughter, you will take wrong steps and you will mishear my directions at times. But I am right here with you, and I promise to bring you safely to the home I’ve prepared for you. No matter what may happen or how you may mess up, I will take care of you.”

Jill was silent for a moment as she absorbed her father’s words. Then she slowly got up and hesitantly started on her way again. She would trust her father to lead her. She would try to remember what she had learned on the mountaintop. This dark thicket was only temporary—one day she would get to live with her father in the home he had already prepared for her. And even now, her father was guiding her, watching over her even when she stumbled and fell.

Although the darkness had only grown darker and the thicket seemed to be even thornier, Jill no longer felt the same suffocating panic squeezing her heart—that is, until she stopped thinking about her father and her future home and began looking at the darkness and thicket. Jill found that she had to continually watch out lest her mind begin to wander and her heart begin to fear.

I wish I could report that Jill made it through that thicket without ever stumbling or going the wrong way, but that would not be true. Jill often misunderstood her father’s directions and stumbled, just like her father had warned her she would. But her father was always right there to help her and teach her. In fact, Jill’s father always managed to use Jill’s falls to strengthen her and prepare her for what she would face next. His patience never expired, and his love never faltered. Jill began to realize she could rely on her father, not just when she could see him, but even when the confusing darkness hid his face.

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“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:20b
No one would have guessed by Rosemary’s actions that the king was staying with her. To tell you the truth, Rosemary herself had forgotten all about her distinguished guest. She felt completely overwhelmed by all the things she needed to get done. Why, the list of things left on her list exceeded the number of minutes left in the day! And everything on the list simply had to get done.

Rosemary hardly glanced up from her filing when her friend Anna arrived and seated herself across the table. Anna silently watched Rosemary for a few minutes with a pitying gaze. Finally, she ventured to speak. “Rosemary, why are you wasting your time?”

If Anna had been trying to get her friends attention, she had succeeded. “Wasting my time? What do you mean? I’m working frantically!” Rosemary exclaimed.

Anna nodded. “I know. You’re getting a lot done, but you’re missing out on the most important thing. Rosemary, don’t you know that the king is in the parlor and has been waiting for you? You’re wasting your time with him!”

The king—Rosemary had forgotten entirely about him! Apart from a brief “Good morning” and “Good evening,” she had basically ignored him all day. The remaining things on her list suddenly seemed completely unimportant. Rosemary dashed for the parlor. Sure enough, the king was there—had been there all along—and she had wasted her time with him!

Rosemary slowly approached the king. “I—I’m so sorry I didn’t come sooner,” she stammered.

The king’s gentle eyes seemed to pierce strait through her heart, “So am I.”

“I—” Rosemary floundered for an excuse. “I had lots of paperwork and housework that needed done,” she finished.

“I know that,” the king replied. “I know all about your many deadlines. But I wanted to spend the day with you. I wanted to file those papers, to wash those dishes, and to plan those studies with you.”

Rosemary hung her head in shame as she realized how foolish she had been.

The king’s next words interrupted her thoughts. She could hardly believe her ears. The king was offering to forgive her and to give her a new beginning.

A few minutes later, Rosemary returned to the office to finish her filing. Only this time, the king came with her. They would finish the paperwork together.

“\textbf{\textit{If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”}}

\textbf{1 Peter 4:11}
Abigail sighed as she gathered up the last plate from the large oak table. She dreaded going into the kitchen and starting the long dish-washing process. Abigail’s family earned extra income by taking in boarders, and cooking for them all certainly produced a large array of dishes!

Abigail knew the mound of dishes would be unusually large tonight as they had two extra guests staying with them. With another little sigh, Abigail turned and headed for the kitchen. Her eyes wandered out the little window over the sink. Sometimes she could barely make out the king’s distant castle. But she couldn’t see anything but city smog tonight. Her heart felt sad. Would she ever see the king?

Seeing the king had always been Abigail’s ambition. She longed to please him and to know him. Her longing only made the washing the dishes seem more intolerable. How she wished she could be in the king’s presence right now!

Abigail didn’t notice the solitary figure watching her from the corner. It wouldn’t have really mattered if she had noticed him. He was just one of their old boarders. Just as she finished drying the last plate, however, he ventured to speak. “Could I have a glass of water?” he petitioned.

Abigail, who had just finished congratulating herself on her completion of the dishes and was already half way out of the kitchen, did not necessarily welcome this new interruption. She grabbed the nearest cup she could find, filled it with water, and thumped it on the table in front of the old man without saying a word.

Abigail hastily threw on her hat and coat. She served on a committee in charge of teaching the king’s laws and administering his counsels and needed to hurry to a meeting. Meetings and projects for the king took up a great deal of Abigail’s time. She wanted so desperately to please the king!

In her haste to get out the door, Abigail nearly tripped over the old man who had been in the kitchen the other day. “I’m sorry,” she muttered.

The old man smiled. “That’s all right,” he replied. “I was trying to find you. I wondered if I could accompany you on your trip?”

Abigail could hardly hide her horror at the thought. Having the old man with her would slow her down terribly! “That’s nice of you to offer, but I’d better go by myself,” she replied as graciously as possible. Without another word, she headed out the door.

Abigail seemed to constantly bump into the old man. So it didn’t surprise her greatly when she ran into him at a meeting one day. But how had he gotten there? Like usual, he had asked to go with her, and like usual, she had declined his offer. Why had he come anyway?
Abigail soon found the answer to all her questions. A gentleman arose and announced that he had brought a special guest with him. “Please welcome,” he concluded, “the king.”

Abigail nearly fell off her seat. The king? The old man was the king? It couldn’t be! No, surely not! But, yes, it was!

Abigail hung her head in shame and confusion. All those nights while she had washed dishes and wished she could get a glimpse of the king, he had been in the same room with her. She could have spoken with him. She could have learned from him. But instead, she hadn’t even realized he was there! She had constantly bumped into the king in the hallway or the marketplace or the park, yet she had never acknowledged him. She had sent petition after petition to the castle begging for a glimpse of the king. And all that time the king had been right there, watching and waiting for her. Everyday, everywhere, he had been there, and she had missed him.

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“The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.”
Psalm 145:18
“Well, well, what happened here,” the doctor remarked, half to himself and half to the soldier lying in the hospital cot.

The soldier blinked his swollen eyes open and forced a bloody smile. “I’m hurt,” he muttered. “They bandaged me up a few days ago, but I still don’t feel very well.”

“That I can see,” the doctor assented as he began examining his patient. “But I’m still perplexed by how you were injured. I thought your whole regiment had been summoned to the fort.”

The soldier groaned. “We had.”

“Then, pardon my curiosity, but how did you get hurt like this?”

“I fought.”

“Outside the fort?”

The soldier nodded.

“Didn’t you know the general summoned everyone into the fort?”

“Oh, I knew,” the soldier confessed.

“Didn’t you know it was dangerous to remain outside?”

“Yes, I knew.”

“Didn’t you know it was your duty, not to mention your privilege, to enter the fort?”

“I knew.” After each confession, the soldier’s face grew more and more crimson.

“Did you not have time to get to the fort?” the doctor tried again, fishing for a valid reason why this poor soldier lay wounded before him.

“No, I had plenty of time. I just didn’t go,” the soldier finally admitted.

“Didn’t go?” the doctor’s voice expressed his surprise. “Didn’t you believe the general’s order?”

“I—I thought I believed,” the soldier sounded strangely bewildered.

“But?” persisted the doctor.

“But I wanted to fight for the general. I thought I could serve him better outside the fort, fighting. I fought so hard. I—” a cough terminated his sentence.

The doctor stared at the misguided soldier. “I thought I heard you just say that you knew you’d been commanded to run to the fort, yet you remained outside?”
The soldier glanced the other direction. He could not bear the doctor’s penetrating gaze. “Yes,” he finally whispered.

The doctor shook his head sadly. “I hope you’ve learned your lesson, young man. When the general says ‘come,’ don’t wait another minute. Don’t try and serve him your way. You’ll end up beaten and bruised every time.”

“I know,” the solider agreed. “And from now on, I’ll live like I know.”

The doctor smiled. “That’s the only kind of knowing that counts.”

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“He replied, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.’”

Luke 11:28

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Matthew 11:28-29
The town marshal, Isaac, and his dinner guest sat quietly around the marshal’s table. They had just finished eating, and now passed the time in pleasant conversation.

“Say, Isaac, anything new at the jail?” the guest, Richard, inquired casually.

“Indeed, there is!” Isaac replied. “I have never seen anything like it in my life.”

Richard immediately became intrigued. “What! Something a life-long marshal has not seen? I didn’t know that existed. What is it?”

“I’m afraid I can’t figure that out myself, and it is much too difficult to explain. But I’ll tell you what, how would you like to come with me and see for yourself?”

Richard, whose curiosity had now risen to an almost unbearable level, readily assented. A few moments later, the two headed down the street to the town jail. Isaac opened the door and ushered his guest inside.

Richard glanced around, not quite sure what he should expect to see. His gaze fell immediately on the prison cell, where a prisoner sat weeping on the floor. Richard noticed the prisoner’s badly bruised body. “What happened?” he whispered.

“Wait and see,” the marshal replied.

Suddenly the prisoner leaped to his feet, exclaiming, “I will conquer this! I will get out of here!” He threw his body against the iron bars and shook them with all his might. When that failed, he tried to climb the walls, hoping somehow to make it to the window up above. Failing in this attempt as well, he took a little stick and tried to saw through the bars. He tried until his hands bled from the effort, but to no avail.

Richard turned to his friend for an explanation. Marshal Isaac shook his head in bewilderment as he told the sad tale. “This man was put in prison for attempted murder and for incalculable debts he could never pay. But the man whom he attempted to murder withdrew all charges against him and paid all the debts the man owed. More than that, he posted the necessary bail to free this man from prison.”

“Why haven’t you told the prisoner? He seems to want freedom badly enough!” Richard asked in bewilderment.

“I have told him, Richard, hundreds of times. Every time I see him I tell him. I have left the prison door unlocked. See, it is even partly ajar. The man only needs to walk through the door into freedom.”

“Why then does he wear himself ragged in trying to break down the bars?”

The marshal shook his head. “I don’t know. That’s what I don’t understand. Somehow, I don’t think he believes me when I tell him he can simply walk through to freedom. He thinks somehow he has to earn his freedom and thus struggles to free himself from the prison cell. Yet only his own pride and independence keep him imprisoned.”
Richard looked once more at the foolish prisoner. The prisoner was still feverishly attempting to break through those iron bars. His efforts had bruised and cut him so badly. *And all the time he could just walk through the open door*, Richard thought to himself. Oh, poor man! Poor, foolish man!

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“You have been set free from sin...”
Romans 6:18a
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Won’t You Let Me Carry That?

Daniel loved to carry things. As a toddler, gigantic stuffed animals twice his size often filled his little hands. As he grew older, he carried larger handfuls of toys and just about everything else he could find. His tendency to carry everything himself caused him to constantly drop or bang into something. Black and blue marks often dotted his body. But despite all this, Daniel never allowed anyone to carry anything for him if he could help it.

Daniel and his father crammed a tent and as many supplies as they could into their backpack. They were going backpacking together, and Daniel could hardly wait to begin their hike. He had been looking forward to this special time with his father for months. His mind raced with the anticipation of seeing the breathtaking mountain peaks and listening to the merry chatter of the forest creatures.

After what seemed like hours to the eager boy, Daniel and his father finally stood at the base of the mountain. Daniel, of course, insisted on carrying the backpack, though he could barely even lift it to his shoulders. An onlooker might have wondered if he had even heard his father’s offer to carry the backpack for him.

At first, Daniel’s shoulders hardly sagged under the immense weight. But soon the constant pressure made Daniel’s neck ache. Daniel tried to ignore the growing pain.

Daniel and his father paused at a small hut a few yards off the path. There Daniel’s father purchased fishing supplies and some last minute items. Once again, Daniel insisted on carrying everything. He made a pitiful sight stumbling after his father, trying to juggle a backpack, fishing pole, and bucket on his tiny nine-year-old frame. Still, Daniel ignored his fathers constant offers to carry his burdens.

As they hiked to the campsite, Daniel’s little mind, instead of thrilling at the beauty around him and the opportunity to be with his father, dreaded each new step. His arms felt like they were going to fall off any moment, and his legs ached terribly. Daniel could not think of anything except his fatigued body.

“Father, I’m so tired. I don’t think I can go another step,” Daniel moaned. He loved his father and wanted so desperately to do a good job carrying the supplies, but he felt so tired. Despite his best effort to control them, tears filled his eyes and started rolling down his cheeks.

“I know you can’t carry all those burdens. Won’t you let me carry everything for you?” Daniel’s father offered once again. “My shoulders are big enough to handle it all.”

Daniel marched on as if he hadn’t heard his father. He continued to moan and complain and ask his father to lighten his burdens, all the while refusing to let his father take the burdens from his shoulders.

Miserable mile passed miserable mile. Finally, Daniel couldn’t stand the strain another second. “Take them, Daddy,” he whispered. “I don’t even have enough strength to put them into your hands.”

Quick as lightening, Daniel’s father whisked both Daniel and all the supplies into his strong arms. As Daniel rested his weary head against his father’s strong breast, he wondered why he had ever insisted on carrying anything. From his father’s arms, he could notice the breathtaking view around him. He could hear the robin singing and could relish in the invigorating mountain air. Best of all, he could feel his father’s love around him. He felt certain there couldn’t be a happier place on earth than in his father’s
arms. *I will let my father carry all my burdens and me too from now on,* Daniel whispered as he drifted into a sweet slumber.

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“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”
Matthew 11:28-29
Anna looked longingly at the dolls in the store window. They were just like the doll her friend had. Oh, if only she could have one of those dolls! Anna could picture how much fun she would have playing with her doll. She would dress it and care for it as tenderly as a mother cares for her child.

That night at dinner, Anna was uncharacteristically silent. Although her father tried several times to get her attention, Anna’s mind was completely preoccupied with the dolls she had seen.

Normally Anna and her father would spend time together after dinner. Those evenings with her father were usually the highlight of Anna’s day. But this evening, nothing seemed like any fun. Although she tried to talk with her father, Anna’s mind kept wandering to the dolls in the shop window.

“Father, can I have one of the dolls in the shop window?” she finally got the courage to ask.

Her father lovingly drew her toward him as he replied, “My darling daughter, a doll isn’t really what you need right now. I want you to trust me to bring you what you really need.”

Anna sighed. She certainly felt like she needed a doll! But she knew that she could trust her father. “Okay, Daddy,” she whispered, “I’ll trust you.” Her heart at rest, Anna skipped off to bed.

The next day, however, she went over to play with her friend. Of course, her friend wouldn’t stop playing with and talking about the doll she had. Anna could hardly stand it. She seemed to have forgotten all about her father’s promise to provide what she truly needed. She felt sure nothing but a doll could ever make her happy.

Instead of singing through her afternoon tasks, Anna mechanically moved through the day. Her life felt so miserable and empty. Every once in a while she would remember her father’s promise, and a smile would flit quickly across her face. But what if her father forgot about his promise to provide what she needed? Or what if, when her father went to buy her a doll, they were all gone? That thought tormented Anna. Had she been a little wiser or older, she might have realized that the doll she thought would bring her happiness was really causing her to be unhappy.

Time passed by in this manner. Anna and her father hardly saw each other any more. It wasn’t that Anna was purposefully avoiding him, but she just didn’t seem to have room for any other thoughts besides the one thought that had consumed all her energy—getting one of those dolls. Many times she thought of how she might purchase a doll herself, but her genuine love for her father and her good upbringing prevented her from going against her father’s wishes.

Finally, Anna could not stand her misery any longer. She simply had to talk with her father again. “Daddy, I really want a doll,” she confessed.

“I know.”

“You do?” Anna looked up in surprise. She thought for sure that her father had forgotten all about the doll. After all, he had so many other matters to handle.

“Of course I do. I’ve never forgotten my promise to bring you what you need. And I’ve known all about your struggle too. I’ve been waiting for you to talk with me.”
Anna hung her head. Oh, why had she believed that her father didn’t care!

Anna’s father drew her lovingly onto his lap. “Anna, I want you to understand that the doll you long for, while it is such a nice, lovely thing, can’t bring you happiness. Can’t you see how it has already taken away your happiness? You will find true joy, not in a doll, but in delighting in the tasks before you each day. And I promise you that I will never, ever forget about you. Will you trust me to give you what you need each day?”

Anna nodded as she squeezed her father tightly. She would trust him. She went to bed that night with a lighter heart than she had for a long time.

The next morning, however, she awoke thinking about the dolls at the store. She had to work hard all day to check her thoughts and remind herself to trust her father and simply delight in what her father had given her. Gradually, Anna began to forget about her desire for a doll. She began to enjoy her daily tasks again. Her old smile returned. Best of all, she was spending precious time with her father once more.

As Anna grew to know her father better, she realized that she could trust him whether or not he ever gave her a doll. She discovered that true joy comes, not from getting what she wanted, but from complete surrender and delight in her father’s wishes.

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“Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD and delight in his salvation.”
Psalm 35:9
One Audience

I wonder whether my father will like this suit I made him, Jane thought to herself as she waited for some of her friends to arrive. Ah, there was Amy! Amy would give her an honest opinion.

Amy surveyed the suit thoughtfully. “It’s lovely! But if it were me, I’d probably put another tuck right here,” Amy finally declared.

Jane, eager to make the suit perfect, ran upstairs and hastily added the necessary tuck. By the time she made it back down the stairs, her friend Mary had arrived. Mary pronounced the suit “spectacular,” except that it could use to be hemmed just an inch or so more. Again, Jane raced upstairs to complete the necessary improvement.

Over and over, Jane repeated this process. It seemed that everyone had a different opinion on how the suit should look. When one friend suggested she remove the tuck she had labored so industriously to add, Jane raced up to her room, locked the door, and burst into tears. She simply couldn’t take it anymore!

Awhile later, Jane heard a soft knock at the door. “Can I come in?” her father’s voice asked.

“Please,” Jane sobbed.

“You must open the door.”

Jane slowly arose and opened the door. Her father stood at the threshold, his arms wide open. Jane buried her head on his shoulder and tearfully poured out her troubled heart into her father’s listening ears.

“Oh, my darling daughter, you can’t play to what everyone else thinks of you and what you’ve done,” her father commented when she had finished.

“I found that out,” Jane whispered. “Oh, Father, I should have just asked you what you thought! Then I wouldn’t have had to worry about whether everyone else liked or didn’t like the suit. Yours is the only opinion that really matters!” Jane exclaimed with sudden illumination. Then another thought occurred to her. She hadn’t seen her father all day. Since she was used to spending lots of time with him, this struck her as rather odd. “Father, where were you this morning?”

Jane’s father smiled strangely. “Do you really want to know?”

Jane nodded.

“Well, I’ve been waiting for you. All morning long, while you ran up and down the stairs worrying about what others thought, I was waiting in the hallway, trying to get your attention. I think you were too focused on others to notice me, though. Then ever since you locked yourself in your room, I have been standing at the door, quietly knocking, waiting for you to let me in. But you couldn’t hear me over your tears.”

Jane hung her head in shame. What a fool she had been! Her father had been waiting for her, but in her preoccupation with what others thought, she had completely missed him.

“Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.” Galatians 1:10
Another Box?

“Not again,” Sarah muttered as she made her way to the front door. This was now the second afternoon in a row that she had been interrupted from something important by the doorbell. Yesterday, it had been a neighbor with an old box to give her. Who would it be today?

Sarah was a bit surprised to find no one at the door at all. Only another old box. Sarah grumbled to herself about being disturbed for nothing as she grabbed the box and tossed it down the basement with the box she had been given yesterday. As she turned to head back upstairs, she felt something under her feet. She tried to steady herself, but she could feel herself falling…

Sarah landed to the floor with a loud thud. *I wonder who put this here*, Sarah thought to herself as she rubbed her sore bottom.

Sarah’s brother Benjamin soon answered her unspoken question. “Oh, Sarah, are you okay? I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to trip you. That box came earlier this afternoon for you.”

Another box, thought Sarah as she stood to her feet. *Why do people keep putting these annoying boxes in my way?*

“Why don’t you open the box, Sarah, and see what’s inside?” Benjamin asked.

“Because I’m sure it doesn’t contain anything important,” Sarah replied as she tossed the box down the basement stairs. She had tried to open one of the other boxes she had received earlier that day, but had not seen anything inside except brown paper packaging. Another package she had attempted to open had given her painful splinters. Sarah felt quite confident that these boxes did not contain anything worth having. She was certain they were part of some sort of conspiracy to annoy her.

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Sarah hurried through the streets. She simply had to get her errand done. Why did it seem that everyone was out to hinder her?

First Mrs. Adams had met her and handed her—of all things—an old box! “I thought you might want this,” she had said.

Sarah couldn’t understand it. Why did she keep getting these old boxes everywhere and from everyone? Sarah had politely accepted the box and headed back to the house to store it in the basement with the other boxes. Then she had hurried back outside to go on her errand, only to trip over yet another old box lying on her front lawn!

Things just proceeded from bad to worse. Everywhere she went, she kept tripping over old boxes and cartons of all sizes, shapes, and colors. She gave up trying to store them in the basement and began simply ignoring them as best as she could. She really wished she could make them all disappear.

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Sarah didn’t think she could take any more. She’d been tripping over boxes now all week, and she was completely exhausted and frustrated, not to mention badly banged up from all her falls. So she finally did what she should have done from the beginning—sought out her father and poured into his ever-listening ears all her troubles.

Sarah’s father listened with never-ending patience as she explained what had been happening. “You see, Father,” Sarah finished, “I really just don’t know what to do! I want to be happy and rejoice in the tasks you’ve given me to do each day, but I don’t see how to do that with all these boxes everywhere. It seems like everyone I meet wants to put a box in my way.”

Sarah’s father lifted her chin and looked into her teary eyes. “My dear daughter, did you ever think of the fact that all those boxes might really be gifts someone was trying to send you?”

Sarah looked at her father in surprise. “Gifts? But they looked so ugly, and when I opened one of them it just had a bunch of brown paper—”

“But, Sarah, buried deep within that brown paper was a special gift just for you. You just didn’t look deep enough. I happen to know each one of those boxes of which you complain contained a gift carefully chosen especially for you.”

Sarah gasped. “You don’t mean, Father, that those boxes were really from you? And that they contained something special?”

“Yes, child, that’s exactly what I mean. Those people who kept putting those boxes in your way and seemed bent on annoying you were but messengers I had chosen to try to get you to notice the gifts I’ve been trying to give you.”

Sarah could scarcely believe it. All those boxes of which she had complained were really gifts from her father! All those people who kept annoying and delaying her were really just her father’s messengers! Her father was showering her with gifts, and she, instead of delighting in those gifts, had complained about them, ignoring some and tossing others in the basement like a box of rubbish! How that must have hurt her father’s heart! How could she have been so foolish? “Oh, Father, I’m so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?” Sarah whispered.

Sarah’s father smiled and drew from his pocket an old, brown box. “Open this,” he instructed.

Sarah carefully opened the box. Inside was a picture of a cross with the words “forgiveness” written on it. “My child, forgiveness is one of my gifts to you. You have missed out on the joy of seeing the many gifts I sent you each day this week, but you can begin afresh right now.”

A broad grin crossed Sarah’s face for the first time all week. A few minutes later she left her father’s office, eager to discover the gifts her father had in store for her. She hadn’t gone far before she tripped over something…
Splat. Sarah was on the floor once again. Her first inclination was to grumble and threaten to find whoever put something in the middle of the hallway, but then she caught sight of her father standing in the doorway. She leaped up with excitement. Who put this old box here didn’t really matter—it was a gift from her father! Oh, when would she learn to recognize her father’s gifts?

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“Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.”  
Psalm 119:91

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”  
Romans 5:3, 4
Katie wanted to slide down that slide desperately! There was just one problem—she couldn’t figure out how to get to the top. She had tried climbing up the slide, but had failed. Now she was vainly attempting to jump to the top. Although she jumped with all her might, she couldn’t reach the platform. She kept falling, scraping, or banging something in the process.

After a few minutes of trying, Katie had finally convinced herself she couldn’t get to the top on her own. She then did what she should have done from the beginning—turned to her father for help. “Daddy, no can! No can! Helps me!”

Katie’s father looked tenderly at his little daughter. He had been trying to help his daughter the whole time, but, wanting to be a big girl on her own, she had persistently resisted his efforts. Now, however, she allowed him to gently lead her to the other side of the platform.

There, to Katie’s surprise, was a chain ladder she hadn’t noticed before. While the rungs were way too far apart for Katie to climb on her own, Katie’s father put his strong arms around her and helped her climb. Soon Katie had reached the top of the platform. What had appeared impossible a moment ago had been achieved—when she had let her father take her one step at a time.

"Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long."
Psalm 25:5
Davy hurried toward the house, eager to get the screwdriver his father had sent him to find. He couldn’t wait to return and spend some more time with his father. He’d been begging his father to let him help with the car for weeks, and his father had finally agreed! How much fun they’d been having together! He was eager to be back by his father’s side. Surely it wouldn’t take more than a minute to grab a screwdriver.

Upon opening the kitchen door, a fragrant aroma greeted him. His mom had made cookies! The temptation proved too much. He simply had to pause long enough to grab a cookie. Then, of course, he needed a glass of milk to wash the cookie down. By the time he had finished his snack, he’d done what he’d never thought possible a few moments ago—forgotten all about his father and the car.

“Davy, how is the work on the car progressing?” Mrs. Meller asked her son as he cleared his place.

The question jarred Davy’s memory. His father! Hurriedly answering his mother’s question, he raced toward the basement in search of the screwdriver.

On his way, he bumped into his older brother. “Say, Davy, look at this,” Andrew called, holding up a new Lego invention he had put together. Of course, Davy simply had to pause and investigate his brother’s workmanship. It was several minutes before Davy, chagrined at his forgetfulness, again remembered his father was waiting.

He nearly tripped over a toy he’d been looking for everywhere. He paused long enough to examine it and set it somewhere safe. Then, of course, he had to tell his brother he’d found it…

Finally, Davy opened the tool chest. He fumbled around for the screwdriver. Where was it? No, that was the wrench, and that was a tool he’d never seen before. Davy looked everywhere for the screwdriver, but in vain. Disheartened and embarrassed, he headed outside to tell his father he had failed.

“Ah, Davy, there you are. I’ve been missing you. I just finished fixing the car.”

“You’ve finished?” Davy was both perplexed and heartbroken. How had his father finished without the screwdriver? Had he really missed out on this special time with his father that he’d looked forward to for weeks?

Noticing his son’s perplexed look, Mr. Meller explained, “When you didn’t return, I went in and found the screwdriver myself. Would you like to talk about what happened in there?” Mr. Meller spoke the last words very gently.

Davy’s eyes watered with tears as he explained his poor conduct. He ended his explanation with a choked, “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

His father had listened quietly. Now, he lifted his son’s tear-stained cheek. “I forgive you, Davy. I think you’ve learned a valuable lesson today.”

“You do?”
Mr. Meller nodded. “Yes. You’ve learned the importance of remaining intent on your purpose. If you had kept me in your mind the whole time and remembered I was waiting for you, longing to spend time with you, cookies and toys wouldn’t have seemed so important, would they have?”

Davy shook his head. Oh, why had he let himself be so easily sidetracked from his father?

“Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”
Philippians 2:2 (NASB)

“More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord…”
Philippians 3:8 (NASB)
Jonathan could hardly contain his excitement, nor did he make any effort to hide his pleasure at his accomplishment. He had learned his ABCs!

For the next several weeks, Jonathan recited his alphabet to anyone who would listen. During mealtimes, he made a point of pointing out the letters on all the food packages. On car trips, he entertained himself by sighting off the letters on the billboards they passed.

One day, Jonathan’s father offered to teach Jonathan the sounds letters make. He tried to explain that knowing the alphabet was just the first step to the whole world of reading.

Jonathan didn’t seem very interested. “But Daddy, I already know my ABCs. See?” With this, he began singing the alphabet song once again.

His father looked at him with a smile. “If I were you, Jonathan, I wouldn’t be content with just knowing my ABCs. There’s so much more to learn! I’m willing to teach you more whenever you’re ready.”

*What more could there be than ABCs?* Jonathan wondered as he hurried off to play. He was perfectly content with his current knowledge of the alphabet. Until one day…

Jonathan came racing into the family room where his father sat reading.

His father looked up with a worried look. “What happened?” he asked, fearing by his son’s glowing cheeks that something terrible had taken place.

Jonathan’s story soon came tumbling out. “The letters in the alphabet—my ABCs—they—they make sounds. And those sounds make words. And those words—why, those words make books. At least that’s what Colin said. Is that true?” Jonathan’s bright blue eyes looked inquisitively at his father, eagerly awaiting his confirmation of his recent revelation.

“Yes, son, it’s true. I tried to tell you all about it the other day, but you seemed content with just knowing your ABCs.”

“I’m not content now!” Jonathan exclaimed with all his youthful enthusiasm. “I have been missing out, but now I want to learn more and more and more! Will you teach me, Daddy?”

Jonathan’s dad smiled broadly. “Nothing would delight me more. I’ve only been waiting for you to ask.”

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“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”
Matthew 7:7
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Sand Castles

The weather couldn’t have been nicer. The warm sunshine provided just enough warmth to make wearing shorts comfortable, yet the gentle ocean breeze kept the temperature from climbing above eighty degrees.

On the beach, one little boy was industriously making the most of the gorgeous day. All morning long he’d been hard at work building a sand castle. The castle now towered above his little head, but he still kept working. So great was his preoccupation with his work that he hardly even paused for lunch.

After building the basic framework of his castle, he spent hours constructing sand dams and bridges to protect his masterpiece from the ocean’s waves. With painstaking care, he decorated his castle with seashells. Using his toy shovel, he carved drawings on the castle’s walls.

Mr. Gunther watched his son’s progress with interest. Several times he tried to warn the boy that the ocean would eventually destroy his castle. But the boy, Robby, insisted no ocean would be able to wreck his castle. Mr. Gunther tried to interest his son in playing Frisbee, swimming, or reading, but Robby had no interest in anything but his sand castle. So Mr. Gunther tried to talk with Robby while he worked, but this too failed. Robby didn’t have any time to talk; couldn’t his dad see that see he was busy building a masterpiece? Finally, Mr. Gunther decided to let his son work undisturbed. Although he had taken the day off to spend some special one-on-one time with his son, he would have to be content to watch him from a distance.

Towards evening, the ocean began to creep up the shoreline, edging closer and closer to Robby’s castle. Much to Robby’s consternation, the swelling waves eventually brushed against his castle walls.

Robby began to panic. He frantically raced to repair the broken dams, not realizing he could never succeed in keeping the ocean back. Tears trickled down his chubby cheeks as he watched his hard work fall apart.

Mr. Gunther put his arms around his son and pulled him close. “It’s okay,” he whispered.

“Oh, Daddy, it’s gone!” Robby sobbed. “I’m sorry, Daddy. Our whole day together is gone. And I hardly spent any time with you. I spent it all on—” Robby ended by pointing forlornly to the now-wrecked castle.

Mr. Gunther patted his son’s head reassuringly. “I know,” he whispered. “Come, let’s not waste any more time.”

Robby nodded. Oh, how he regretted investing his day in a sand castle!

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“If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward.”
1 Corinthians 3:12-14
Andrew Hunter looked forlornly out the window at the backyard where his brothers and sisters were merrily playing. *If only there were a pond out back,* he thought to himself, *then I would play outside with everyone else. But it is too hot to play outside without a pond to jump in afterwards.* Andrew could almost feel the refreshing cool sensation of diving into a pond. He could imagine how much fun he would have swimming every day. But while there was plenty of room outback for a pond, there was no pond. If only…

Andrew’s wish had finally come true. They were getting a pond! He felt like jumping for joy. Now, at last, he could enjoy playing outside. He would never be unhappy again—or so he thought.

“Andrew, why do you look so miserable?” Andrew’s mother asked with concern.

Andrew sighed. “There are too many mosquitoes to play outside,” he moaned. “They love that silly pond. If only we didn’t have that pond!”

Mrs. Hunter stopped and stared at her son. “Andrew Hunter,” she exclaimed, “you wanted that pond!”

Andrew sighed. “I know,” he mumbled.

“It didn’t bring you the happiness you thought, did it?”

Andrew shook his head.

“Things never do,” Mrs. Hunter stated. “If there were no pond out there, you still wouldn’t be happy, now would you?”

Andrew thought for moment. “No, I guess not. But if only—”

“And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.”
1 Corinthians 10:10

“In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt!’”
Exodus 16:2, 3a
Amy Peterson eagerly jumped out of the car. They had finally arrived at the picnic sight!

The entire time she helped her mother unload the car and lay out the picnic lunch, Amy could hardly keep her eyes off the nearby stream. The stream was hardly more than a trickle of gently moving water, but Amy loved watching it. She loved looking into its crystal clear reflection and listening to its gentle, rhythmic hum.

Amy’s father noticed her attentive interest in the water. After they had finished eating, he offered to take Amy into the stream.

Amy’s eyes grew wide. Go out into the stream? Suddenly the gentle stream looked like a roaring river to her. She eyed the moving water with suspicion.

Mr. Peterson hastened to allay his daughter’s fears. “Don’t worry. It’s perfectly safe. Besides, I will hold your hands. The water won’t be able to hurt you. You can trust me.”

Amy thought hard for a minute before she finally put her little hand into her father’s and followed him down to the water’s edge. Mr. Peterson lifted Amy into his strong arms and waded into the middle of the stream. “I’m going to let you float on your back,” he explained. “I will hold both your hands. Just lie on your back, like that. That’s it. You’re floating now.”

Amy felt terrified as she felt the cold water around her. She shut her eyes and clenched her mouth, too scared to look or speak.

The water began to gently pull Amy’s legs toward the side of the stream. Amy panicked and began flailing her arms and legs.

“Amy, stop panicking!” Mr. Peterson must have shouted these words ten times before Amy finally heard them. “Calm down,” Mr. Peterson continued. “You aren’t going anywhere. Don’t forget that I’m holding your hands. The water can pull at your legs, but it can’t take you anywhere unless I let it.”

Amy stopped flailing when she finally understood her father’s words. Her father wouldn’t let anything happen to her. She felt quite confident he was strong enough to stand against the water’s pull. She could feel his tight grip on her arm. Suddenly she knew she’d be okay. Her father wouldn’t ever let go.

Slowly, Amy relaxed her tense muscles. If her father held her safely, she didn’t need to worry. She began to enjoy the feeling of the water rushing around her, bouncing her gently up and down. A giggle even escaped her. This was really quite fun! The same pull of the stream that once frightened her now made her smile. She knew the water couldn’t dislodge her father. She was safe in his arms.

“God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.’”

Hebrews 13:5b, 6a
Yesterday

Helen’s face displayed her dismay and alarm as she pulled in her driveway after a two-week vacation. The once well-maintained lawn looked like an overgrown pile of weeds. What had happened to her grandson—hadn’t he looked after the house like he’d promised?

Things didn’t look any better inside. Dirty dishes filled up every inch of the kitchen counter. Rotting food lay unattended on the table. Books and dirty clothes were strewn across the floors. None of the beds were made. It looked like nothing had been done in weeks to clean or maintain the home.

Helen finally located her grandson reclining in one of the lounge chairs out back. He greeted her lackadaisically. “Home already? Did you have a nice trip?”

Helen simply stared at him for a moment while she collected her thoughts and steadied her voice. “The house—John, didn’t you do anything?”

John shrugged his shoulders lazily. “What was there to do?”

“The dishes, for one thing,” Helen suggested.

John smiled. “Oh, those? Well, I did them the first couple of days, but then I stopped. After all, I’d just done them yesterday.”

“And the yard, the wash, the straightening—”

“I stopped those too since I’d done them the day before. I worked hard the first few days—no house could have been cleaner, and no yard better tended. After that, I just figured I could sit back and enjoy life. I told myself I had taken care of everything yesterday.”

Helen wasn’t sure whether she should laugh or cry or scream. She finally chose a different response altogether. “John,” she said in a very serious tone, “look around at this house. Look at the filthy kitchen and the cluttered floors. It will take us days to get this house livable again. You can’t live in yesterday. It doesn’t matter how wonderful a job you did yesterday. What matters is how you are living today.”

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”
Hebrews 3:7b, 8a
“Are you ready to plant your seeds, Mary?”

Her mother’s question half frightened Mary. She’d been playing with her seeds all day and didn’t want to stop. Above all, she didn’t want to put her precious seeds into the ground, cover them with dirt, and never see them again. Clutching her seeds tightly, she exclaimed, “I don’t want to lose them!”

Mary’s mother gave her a curious look. Then, after a moment, she gingerly plucked a nearby flower and placed it in Mary’s hand. “How would you like to have many more flowers like this?” she asked.

Mary squealed with delight, “Oh, Mother, I love flowers! I want lots and lots of them.”

“This flower came from a seed just like your seeds,” Mary’s mother explained. “Last year, I put the seed into the ground and watered it. The seed died, but several days later a plant started to grow. And now look at the beautiful flower I have. If I had never given up my seeds, though, I would not have a flower.”

Mary finally understood. She unclenched her little fists and declared, “I want to plant my seeds too.”

“**For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”**

Mark 8:35
Remaining Focused

Juliana took a deep breath. Her time to skate had finally arrived. Soon would come her first (and hardest) jumping pass. If she could only make it through that…

The music started, and Juliana’s program began. As Juliana headed into the dreaded jumping pass, her mind carefully reviewed each step. She did not want to make a mistake here. For a few seconds, she was oblivious to everything else around her. Her entire being was completely consumed with the task before her. Up in the air she went…

And down on one foot she came! A broad smile crossed Juliana’s face. She had done it! After solidly landing a few more jumps, Juliana relaxed. She began to listen to the audience’s cheering. Her mind began to think about other things while her body moved mechanically through the program.

The touch of the cold, unyielding ice against her bottom brought her sharply back to her present task. To her horror, Juliana realized she had fallen.

Although Juliana pulled her body up from the ice, she could not seem to rally her mind. She kept lecturing herself for having fallen on such an easy jump. She made several other errors during the remaining minutes of the program.

By the time Juliana stepped off the ice, tears threatened to fall down her cheeks. She poured out the whole story into her coach’s sympathetic ears.

Juliana’s coach wisely said nothing at the moment. But later, he asked her what she thought happened.

Juliana shook her head. “I—I don’t know. I was doing so well that I guess I didn’t think I needed to keep focusing so hard. Then I did so poorly that I couldn’t seem to stop thinking about my mistake.”

Her coach sighed and shook his gray head. “Juliana, every second counts. It doesn’t matter how well or how poorly you did previously. You have to skate moment by moment. In the future, let the past rest when you skate. Continually remain focused.”

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“And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.”

1 John 2:28

“You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?”

Galatians 5:7
At first, the crowd cheered. They liked watching the fantastic dribbling. But they quickly became concerned. Why were the Rockets spending their entire time dribbling? No one on the Rockets had taken a shot in more than five minutes. The team seemed entirely consumed with dribbling.

The crowd was not the only one concerned. The coach soon called a time out. “What do you guys think you’re doing?” he demanded.

The players stared at him in surprise. “You told us to work on being good dribblers. So we have been dribbling,” one of them finally volunteered.

The coach groaned. “That’s not what I meant. Don’t let anything, not even good dribbling, keep you from getting the ball in the basket. Do you understand?”

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“That I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes through the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings… I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 3:8b, 9, 10a, 14
Choosing to Train

Judy couldn’t take her eyes off the ballet performance. The ballerinas’ dancing looked so elegant and graceful. *That must be fun,* Judy thought to herself.

All that week, Judy twirled around the family room. “See, Mom, I’m a ballerina,” she would say.

One day, Judy decided she wanted to be a real ballerina. To her joy, her mother agreed to sign her up for ballet lessons. She could hardly wait!

Judy pranced into her first ballet class. She expected to learn how to dance right away.

Judy’s teacher had other ideas. “You must learn the steps before you can dance,” she explained as she showed Judy three basic ways to position her feet. “Being a ballerina takes lots of training. Every day, I want you to practice these steps.”

For the first several days, Judy practiced the steps with a joyful heart. But she quickly grew tired of practicing. “I don’t feel like doing this anymore,” she whined to her mother one morning.

“We must do things even when we don’t feel like it,” Judy’s mother gently reminded her. “You must keep practicing those steps. Remember, your teacher told you that you were in training. Training involves applying ourselves, no matter how we feel.”

“But my feet hurt. Can’t I just take one day off?”

Judy’s mother shook her head.

“Can I practice later?” Judy begged.

Her mother sighed as she replied gently, but firmly, “Later never comes, Judy. You had better practice now. You will one day be glad that you trained your body this way.”

At the moment, Judy could not imagine ever being glad that she had practiced three silly steps over and over again. But she sighed and obeyed.

Several years later Judy was very glad her mother had made her practice. Because of her faithful practicing, she could now dance as gracefully as the ballerinas she had originally admired.

Judy came home one evening unusually excited. Everyone had complemented her on how well she had danced that evening. Even her teacher could not find a mistake in her moves. Judy told herself that surely now she could stop training.

The next morning, instead of exercising and practicing her ballet steps, Judy curled up on the couch and read a book. At lunch, instead of eating a nutritious meal, Judy ate junk food. That afternoon, instead of getting ready for ballet class, Judy got ready for a nap.
Judy continued living this way for several weeks. One afternoon, however, she decided to attend her ballet class again. To her surprise, her leotard hardly fit, and her legs did not stretch or move like they had in the past. What had happened?

“Have you been faithfully training?” Judy’s teacher asked her.

Judy shook her head. “I didn’t think I needed to train any more.”

Judy’s teacher suppressed a smile as she offered this word of wisdom, “You will always need to train, Judy.”

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“Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.”

1 Timothy 4:7
Running To?

Peter had been running for hours now. Every muscle in his body ached, and each breath came with effort. Yet Peter would not pause. He must keep running.

Mile after mile passed. The sun reached its zenith and shone mercilessly down on Peter’s back. His parched throat stung like fire. Still Peter kept running and running and running.

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“Peter, is that you?” Peter’s friend James called from a few yards away.

“Uh-huh,” Peter panted without slowing his pace.

“Well hang on a minute! I need to ask you something!” James shouted. “Where are you running?” he inquired as he caught up with his friend.

The question brought Peter to a sudden halt. Where was he running? He had been running so hard for so long, he couldn’t seem to remember where he was headed. All he could remember was he had to run.

“Your father has been expecting you for hours now,” James gently reminded him.

His father! Now Peter remembered. He had started out that morning running toward his father. At first, he had raced toward this goal with all his heart. But then what had happened?

James seemed to read his thoughts. “You have been running in circles, Peter. If you look over there, you can see the building where you started from this morning.”

Peter groaned. He had made next to no progress all day! Although he had pushed himself to his max, all his efforts had all been in vain. He had been running aimlessly.

James placed a compassionate hand on Peter’s shoulder. “Take heart. It’s not too late. Start running again. Only this time, remember to run toward your father.”

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“Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly…”

1 Corinthians 9:26a
Jesse gripped the helm firmly. He could hardly believe his father had really let him take their little fishing boat out all by himself!

Jesse remembered his father’s instructions. “Keep your eyes fixed on this lighthouse,” he had said. “If you steer toward its light, you will stay on course.”

Though young, Jesse knew the importance of his father’s instructions. You see, Jesse’s father was the lighthouse keeper. Ever since he could remember, Jesse had watched his father safely guide boats home. He knew he needed to keep his eyes on the light.

That entire first trip, Jesse kept his eyes fastened on the lighthouse’s distant light. In fact, he was so intent on the lighthouse he hardly heard or saw anything else. He didn’t want to lose sight of that light even for a moment. He knew his father was there in that lighthouse, faithfully guiding him.

Much to Jesse’s delight, his father began allowing him to take the boat out by himself more and more often. Sitting near the helm began feeling like second nature. The lake, which had at one time looked like a vast sea of blue, now seemed like an old friend.

Quite unconsciously, Jesse began to relax. He no longer worried quite so much about keeping the lighthouse in view. He began watching the sea gulls circle overhead and listening to the gentle lapping of the water against the side of his boat.

One day, Jesse actually fell asleep behind the helm. Now Jesse had not intended to fall asleep. But the gentle rocking of the ship had proved too much for him.

Jesse awoke with a start. The clear blue sky under which he’d fallen asleep was shrouded by a thick, suffocating fog. Jesse could hardly see in front of the boat. Where was he? Oh, how he wished he had kept his eyes on the lighthouse! How could he ever find his way back home now?

Now Jesse had a two way radio connection with his father. He could have simply picked it up and asked his father what to do. But Jesse didn’t want to admit he couldn’t handle this himself. He struggled fruitlessly as long as he could before he finally picked up the radio and chocked out the word, “Father?”

Almost instantly he heard his father’s voice. “Jesse! I’ve been trying to get through to you for hours. I’ve missed you. What happened?” Now Jesse’s father already had a pretty good idea what had happened, but he wanted to give his son the opportunity to tell him.

Jesse hung his head and blushed. He hadn’t even thought about the fact that his father might have been trying to get in touch with him! “I’m lost and—-and I just want to give up.” Jesse felt hot tears rolling down his cheeks despite his greatest efforts to control them. “I’m so sorry,” he added in a low voice. “I didn’t keep my eyes on the lighthouse.”

Jesse never thought his father’s voice had sounded so patient and loving as it did when he said the simple words, “I forgive you.” Jesse knew he didn’t deserve that forgiveness.
“Now,” his father added, “dry those tears and do what you should have been doing all along. Start looking at the lighthouse again. You’ve lost a lot of time and energy, and have probably done some damage to the boat, but it’s never too late to start looking to the light again.”

“But I can’t see the lighthouse, Father. This fog has hidden everything.”

“Just look for the light with all your might, Jesse. I’ve been keeping this lighthouse for many years, and I’ve never once seen a fog too thick that the light couldn’t shine through. Only sometimes you really have to look hard.”

Encouraged by these words, Jesse began peering into the fog. At first, he saw nothing. Then he saw it—a very faint glimmer of light! He had only seen it for a split second, but he had seen it. Jesse immediately turned his boat around to follow that faint glimmer. Was it just his imagination, or had the faint glimmer grown a little brighter?

Jesse kept steering toward the light with all his might. To his great delight, the light kept growing stronger and brighter. Finally, Jesse could once again see the entire lighthouse!

“I can see it!” he shouted into the radio. “Oh, Father, I can see your light again!”

Jesse could almost see the smiling face of his father as he heard his reply through the radio, “I knew you would! Always remember, Jessie, to keep your eyes on the light. Though you wander, you are never outside of my care. My light can reach into even the thickest fog.”

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“The LORD is my light and my salvation.”
Psalm 27:1a

“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”
Psalm 139:11, 12
Losing Focus

Jeremy’s heart pounded as he heard his name called. It was his very first piano recital, and he was nervous. He remembered his teacher’s words. *Just think about your song and forget everything else*, she had told him.

As Jeremy sat down at the grand piano, he tried hard to forget fifty pairs of eyes were watching him. He would just think about his song and play one note at a time.

After making it through the first several stanzas without a hitch, Jeremy began to calm down. This isn’t so bad, he thought to himself. He began to relax a little and let his mind wander…

Jeremy’s fingers hesitated in mid-air. What note came next? He couldn’t remember where he was in the song!

Somehow, Jeremy stumbled through the rest of his song. He knew he had messed up badly. What had gone wrong?

At his next lesson, Jeremy talked with his teacher about what had happened.

“I just completely forgot where I was!” he explained.

His teacher smiled. “That’s a very easy thing to do. When you play, you have to pay attention to each note and stay focused on where you are and what is coming next. But it’s very easy to get distracted. Whenever we begin to let our minds wander, we end up losing our focus and making mistakes.”


Jeremy’s teacher smiled. “It’s okay, Jeremy. Just remember next time to keep focused.”

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“Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.”

Hebrews 3:1
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