Storytelling

"God has a big story, and I can be a part of it!"
HOW TO USE

HomeFront

Each issue highlights an environment your family can create in your home. This month looks at STORYTELLING. Each magazine is divided into two sections: Family Time and Inspire, Equip, Support.

**Family Time articles**
are created to equip you to engage with your children on a regular basis.

**Inspire, Equip, and Support articles**
are parenting stories, devotions, and ideas to encourage you as you spiritually lead your household.

 USE THIS GUIDE TO GET FAMILY TIME STARTED.
 IT’S AS EASY AS 1, 2, 3 ...

1 **Start by deciding on a day and time that works well for your entire family.**
It can be an evening, afternoon, or morning. Just commit to building this time into your family’s natural rhythm—perhaps around a meal.

2 **Look through HomeFront to see what stands out. Choose two or three experiences you would like to incorporate into your family times this month. Don’t feel burdened to complete all the activities—just do what fits your family best. This resource provides more than enough experiences to create transforming environments in your home throughout the month.**

3 **Remember to HAVE FUN! Strive to make each gathering unique to your own family as you enjoy spending time with God and one another.**

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We believe that the Holy Spirit is God’s chosen teacher. It is He who causes spiritual growth and formation when and as He chooses. As such, we have articulated 10 distinct environments to create in your home. We desire to create spiritual space, which we refer to as an environment, in which God’s Spirit can move freely.

A NOTE FROM MICHELLE

The environment of STORYTELLING recognizes that God has been working throughout history. He is still moving and working today. All of the things He has done, is doing, and will do in the future aren’t standalone, independent stories. These things all relate to one another, and together they create one amazing story, which we like to call The Big God Story.

As we’re inspired by The Big God Story, we’re called not to keep it to ourselves but to give it away. We’re called to share our experiences of encountering a loving and faithful God. We’re a faith community that needs to hear how God is moving and creating a unique story in each of our lives. As we share these stories, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can inspire and strengthen one another’s faith.

HomeFront magazine is a nonprofit ministry of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, CO. If you are passionate about this resource and the families it equips, please consider making a one-time or monthly donation to allow this ministry to continue to reach thousands of homes.

Please go to pushpay.com/pay/nlcministries and choose “HomeFront” from the Giving Type to make your tax-deductible donation. Thank you for helping HomeFront minister to families around the world.

OUR MISSION

**INSPIRE** parents with ideas to create fun, spiritually forming times in the normal rhythm of everyday life.

**EQUIP** parents to become the spiritual leaders of God’s truth in their own households.

**SUPPORT** families to engage their communities and change the culture around them.

**Things you won’t want to miss:**
- Parent blogs to inspire you
- Mobile-friendly format
- Lots of downloadable giveaways
- Marketplace to purchase article bundles and more!

The website is filled with fresh ideas and creative resources to help you spiritually parent your children.

**Michelle Anthony**
Michelle is the Executive Pastor of Family Ministries at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, CO. Michelle has graduate degrees in Christian education, theology, and leadership and more than 25 years of church ministry experience as a children’s and family pastor. She loves a good book and a cup of coffee.

@TruInsiration

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As the holidays approach, our team has the unique opportunity of blending each holiday with one of our Ten Environments. What better combination could there be than STORYTELLING and a season of thankfulness? This led us to this month’s theme: “stories of thanks.”

Gracing the cover of this issue are the beautiful ceramics of my dear friend Andrea Luna Reece—@lunareececeramics. When I saw her share these fall pieces on her social media, I knew the rich autumn colors would create the perfect look for our November issue.

From writing stories of thankfulness on a table runner in CAPTURING THE SEASON (page 8) to words of thankfulness on a pumpkin in our PRAYER article (page 16) you won’t run out of fresh new ways for your family to express gratitude this month. Our STORYTELLING (page 18) addresses the all-too-familiar hints of entitlement our children exhibit when it comes to meal time. Jason Kliewer shares how dinner with a friend from Uganda was an eye-opening experience for his daughters.

Our EVERYDAY DAD BLOG (page 40) puts a fun twist on storytelling by encouraging kids to be active participants in the story. STUDENT ID MIDDLE SCHOOL (page 34) reminds us that we always can find something to be thankful for—even in difficult circumstances.

In LOOKING FORWARD (page 48) you will find one of our favorite Advent readings. We hope it helps your family begin the Christmas season focused on Jesus, the newborn King!

Our HomeFront team is thankful for you as you do the hard work of raising spiritually grounded and grateful children who realize they have active roles in God’s big story! Thank you for allowing us to partner with you!

Debbie Guinn
Debbie is the Editor in Chief of HomeFront magazine. She has more than 25 years of experience working in children’s and family ministries. She is passionate about equipping parents to become leaders of God’s truth in their own households. She is a recent transplant to Austin, TX, where she co-parents two of her four grandchildren with her son. She spends her free time enjoying her grandchildren and perusing antique stores and flea markets. debbie@homefrontmag.com

FAMILY VERSE
Memorizing Scripture can be an incredible practice to engage in as a family. But words in and of themselves will not necessarily transform us; it is God’s Spirit in these words who transforms. We come to know God more when we’re willing to open our hearts and listen to His Holy Spirit through the words we memorize. Have fun with this verse, and think of creative ways to invite your family to open up to God as they commit the verse to memory. Go to: homefrontmag.com for a free downloadable copy of the family verse.
I will tell other people about all the good things you have done.

All day long

I will talk about how you have saved your people.

But there’s no way I could say how many times you’ve done this.

Psalm 71:15 NIRV
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This month, capture your family’s stories of thankfulness by creating this easy-to-make table runner. At the beginning of the month, choose one of our hanging options to hang a roll of paper. Then, encourage your family to write their stories of thankfulness throughout the month. If your children are young, a picture or one word will do. But if your children are older, encourage them to write out short stories of gratitude.

When you are ready to celebrate with a feast of thankfulness, tear the section of paper off of the roll and place it down the center of your table. If you have guests attending, encourage them to add their stories as well. This will be a beautiful way for your family to remember and celebrate all that God is doing in your lives. Consider leaving this roll of paper up as a way to document all that your family is thankful for throughout the year!

**WHAT YOU’LL NEED**

**OPTION 1**
- 40" rope
- 2 eyelet hooks/bolts
- 18" roll brown kraft paper

**OPTION 2**
- 2 coat hooks
- 24" wooden dowel
- 18" roll brown kraft paper

*If you would like a less permanent option, consider using Command hooks or placing a dowel between two bookshelves. You could even tear off a piece of butcher paper and tape it to the wall using painter’s tape or lay the paper on the table to write on or decorate throughout the month.

**WHAT YOU’LL DO**

**OPTION 1**
1. Find a spot in your home to hang the roll—be sure it is accessible to each family member.
2. Insert eye hooks in wall 20 inches apart.
3. Tie the rope to one of the eye hooks.
4. Thread the rope through the center of the kraft paper roll.
5. Hang the roll, tie the loose end of the rope to the other eye hook, and trim excess.

**OPTION 2**
1. Find a spot in your home to hang the roll—be sure it is accessible to each family member.
2. Attach coat hooks to the wall 22 inches apart.
3. Insert the dowel through the center of the butcher paper roll.
4. Set the dowel on the coat hooks.

*by Debbie Guinn*
Worship and thanksgiving are integrally connected. When we worship God, we're recognizing and thanking Him for who He is and what He's done. Telling stories of thanksgiving and acknowledging to God all the ways you're grateful for Him is a key act of worship. This month, set aside some time to create fun poems of thanksgiving to God.
WHAT YOU’LL NEED

• Thankful Poem from bit.ly/ThankfulPoem
• 1 sheet of paper per person
• 1 pen or pencil per person

WHAT YOU’LL DO

1. Before you begin this activity, download and print a copy of the Thankful Poem template for each family member from bit.ly/ThankfulPoem. However, do not show them to anyone or pass them out quite yet!
2. Give each family member a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil.
3. Have them write the numbers 1 through 10 down the side of the page.
4. Read through the following list of 10 fill-in-the-blanks, and have your family members write down the first thing that comes to their minds when they hear each phrase. (Be sure not to compare answers so everyone’s poem will be different!)
5. Once everyone has a list of 10 answers, pass out a copy of the Thankful Poem template to each person and have each one fill in the blanks using the answers he or she wrote down.
6. Finally, go around and have everyone read his or her Thankful Poem out loud as an act of worship to God.

FILL-IN-THE-BLANKS

1. Body part, plural
2. Type of flower/plant
3. Season (winter, spring, summer, or fall)
4. Sound a person makes (laugh, sing, talk, cry, sneeze, etc.)
5. Favorite toy
6. Family member who loves to cook (dad, mom, sister, brother, grandma, etc.)
7. Favorite food
8. Favorite fruit, plural
9. Item of clothing, plural
10. Sign of affection, plural (hugs, kisses, cuddles, smiles, etc.)

by Emily Schulz

Emily is the Family and Women’s Ministries Pastor at New Denver Church in Denver, CO. She has her BA in Christian Ministries from Biola University and her MDiv from Denver Seminary. Emily loves seasonal activities; date nights with her husband, Phil, cooking, playing games; spontaneous song and dance; and creating space for people to be known and loved.
What we make of life’s circumstances comes down to the angle from which we look at them. The longer I live, the more deeply I understand that gratitude is a passageway from wrong to right, grumbling to celebrating, despair to hope. The psalmist’s words in this month’s Family Time Verse (page 5) are saturated with gratitude toward the Lord, aren’t they? The writer clearly has a spirit of thankfulness. Yet, when we read the beginning verses of Psalm 71, we see that major struggles have taken place in his life. There is talk, for example, of evil and cruel men (v. 4) and enemies speaking against him and conspiring to kill him (v. 10). Yikes! I love that despite threats and attempts made on his life, he wants to tell of the good things God has done. If he can find the good in horribly bad situations, then we all can.

Probably one of the proudest moments for parents is when their children not only say thank you unprompted but actually mean it. How can we teach gratefulness to children? This is one of my big parenting questions. I desperately want my kids to turn into kind, thankful people. As I experiment with different approaches, it seems that a couple of very tangible things are necessary in order for a spirit of gratitude to fill the home.

To begin with, am I modeling gratitude toward God and others on a daily basis? Are my young children regularly hearing me thank our Father for the beautiful blue sky and the aspen trees changing color outside our windows? Do they hear me thank my husband for being such a hard worker and a fun dad? We all know children imitate adult behavior. I want them to see that Mom has a grateful heart, both in words and actions, as she goes about her days. Secondly, developing a sense of thankfulness takes practice, as does any habit. The more opportunities I give my kids to be kind, polite, and grateful, the more it will become a part of their character. We make a point, for example, of sending thank you notes or pictures to friends and grandparents for birthday and holiday gifts. As we drive around town, at meals, and at bedtime, we talk a lot about the happy parts of our days and who and what we are thankful for.

Ultimately, though, our children’s understanding that they are part of God’s big story is the greatest cause for gratitude. There is comfort in realizing that the purpose of this precious life is not just to fulfill our desires but to play our part in God’s story as it unfolds around us. So, similar to the psalmist, whether the day ended up going the way we had hoped for or not, let’s model and practice in front of our kids how we will find the good—and God—in all situations.

GET YOUR FAMILY TALKING …

1. How do you think gratefulness connects to The Big God Story?
2. How can you challenge yourself to find something positive today in a frustrating/disappointing situation?
3. Can you think of a time you’ve seen someone in our family practice gratitude?
4. What is something we can do as family to show someone else (e.g., Grandma, a neighbor) that we are grateful for him or her?

by Hanna Erickson

Hanna publishes and manages the blog posts on HomeFront’s website. She lives in Colorado Springs, CO, with her husband and three kids. She’s passionate about helping her family intentionally love those around them in both little and big ways.
“FINDING THE GOOD IN BAD SITUATIONS BECOMES A PASSAGEWAY—A PASSAGEWAY TOWARD CELEBRATING RATHER THAN GRUMBLING AWAY YOUR PRECIOUS LIFE.”

Rachel Macy Stafford, Only Love Today
One of the things I love about living in the Midwest is getting to experience the four seasons. I love them all, but fall has my heart; her arrival is my favorite. After the swim parties, sprinklers, and barbecues have faded we wake up one morning to a crisp in the air. As the temperature drops and the sun sets earlier each day it seems we have fewer commitments. We circle together as a family, and our home becomes a safe haven filled with smells of chili, cornbread, and traditions.

We have created summer bucket lists for years. We proudly display them on our refrigerator and spend the summer crossing off items. A few years ago, I wondered, *Why do we stop at a summer bucket list? Why not have one for every season?* These lists are gentle nudges encouraging us to seize the day. Do we always cross everything off? Nope. Is that okay? Absolutely. These lists hold no judgement and aren’t grading our efforts. They just hold some of our most treasured traditions to remind us of what’s important.

When I became a mom, I wanted to offer my sons a childhood filled with meaningful moments. Little did I know that these intentionally created moments would become grounding traditions. As my boys grow older they crave these traditions year after year. In a world with so many unknowns and disappointments they know there are a few things they can count on, like our weekend at Camp Kreger—a weekend my siblings created to make sure our family celebrates fall together. It’s a weekend spent in cabins with cousins, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. We gather around the fire pit and tell stories of our family history. One year we all sat around the fire and each member shared why he or she was thankful.
for my parents and their marriage of 40 years. The stories captivated my boys, and as I watched them listen I realized that these are the stories that will last generation to generation.

Another fall tradition my boys can count on is apple picking with their paternal grandparents. What started seven years ago as a free Saturday with no plans has turned into a sacred family tradition. We look forward to climbing into the wagon filled with hay bales and taking that bumpy ride out to the trees. My boys get a quick lesson from their grandparents on how to spot the perfect apple. I think their favorite part is sampling all the juicy goodness. They discuss the sweetness in the Galas and Golden Delicious versus the tartness of Granny Smiths and Jonathans. They sound like real apple connoisseurs. We take home our apples and gather in the kitchen to turn them into apple crisp. As we sift, measure, and bake it hits me that these are the moments. The moments that turn into traditions. It wouldn’t be fall without our freshly made apple crisp.

This year as I sat down and started our fall bucket list I was filled with gratitude while thinking back on some of our most cherished traditions. As a parent, I want to cultivate a sense of gratitude in our sons for the everyday blessings we can easily take for granted. That’s why every November we lay out butcher paper as a runner on the table during dinner and take turns jotting down things for which we are grateful. Some are simple thoughts and others are more profound, but each one comes from a true feeling of gratefulness. As the seasons shift I encourage you to take the time to reflect on your traditions and what you are grateful for.

by Erin Lorton

Erin spends her days raising four high-energy, full-of-life boys. She loves being a mom and creating ways to make the mundane moments of motherhood feel like a party. Follow her family’s adventures on Instagram: @elorton
A few years ago I realized my prayer life had gotten off track. I noticed that when my husband, Greg, and I prayed every night before bed, our prayers were always asking for something. We had situations on our minds or friends and family we wanted to lift up, and the prayers became long lists of things we wanted from God. And while we are thankful that our Father cares about these things, we realized that we were missing out on an opportunity to be grateful and to celebrate God for what He has done and is already doing in our lives.

First Thessalonians 5:16–18 says, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” These verses are a powerful reminder that when we come before the Lord in prayer we should be giving thanks and rejoicing in what God has done. Since that “aha” moment a few years ago, each night Greg and I start our prayers by each saying at least one thing we are grateful for from the day. Then we pray, always starting with praising God. Slowly this attitude of gratitude has begun to shift our hearts. We notice more and more things we want to thank God for and we are quicker to see the places God is at work in our lives.

Start by setting a pumpkin on your table or counter to stand as a reminder for your family. Write “What are you thankful for?” in big letters on the pumpkin. Then spend a few minutes having everyone write a couple of things on the pumpkin. After everyone has finished, lift these things up to God. Thank Him for the way He has shown up in your family. Each time you eat a meal together have everyone go around and add one new thing to the pumpkin. As you pray over the meal, lift up your prayers of praise. When we tell stories of our thankfulness, over time these stories change our hearts and we start living with an attitude of gratitude.

This month, as a family, set aside a time for stories of gratitude and prayers of praise.

by Krista Heinen

Krista is a pastor who desires to help the next generation understand its place in The Big God Story. She has her BS in elementary education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and her MDiv from Bethel Seminary. Krista loves to preach, play board games, and spend time chatting over coffee. She and her husband, Greg, live in Wisconsin.
WHAT ARE YOU THANKFUL FOR?
With expressions of discontent, my daughters, ages 10 and 8, stared at their dinner plates, which were full of colorful and healthy vegetables and meat. In slightly whiny tones, they communicated to my wife and me that they wanted different food for dinner. They didn’t “feel” like eating this food. The option of a different dinner than the one already prepared is actually not an option in our household, so we tried to convince them of how great this dinner actually was. We explained the valuable nutrition contained in the organic veggies. We pointed out the incredible variety of foods that they as middle-class, “globally rich” United States’ children have access to. But our well-worded, seamless arguments fell on small, deaf, and somewhat-entitled ears. Somehow, eventually, food was consumed, and the kids survived this traumatic event of having to partake of healthy, flavor-filled food (prepared for them, I might add) they did not “feel like eating.”

A few nights later, one of our friends, Charity, stopped by for dinner. Charity is an inspiring, smiley, brilliant lady from Uganda, Africa. She had moved to the United States with her husband only a couple years earlier. Throughout the meal, we were enthralled with her stories of growing up in Uganda (and learning to speak seven languages, for example) and stories of transitioning to life in the United States (she was married but had just learned to ride a bike less than a year ago).

As we ate our dinner of grilled fish and vegetables, our third meal that day, Charity started telling us about the food she ate as a child in Uganda. She asked our daughters to guess how often her family ate meat. The girls agreed on a guess of “once or twice a week.” The correct answer, she told us, was “once, or maybe twice, a year.” Only for an extremely important holiday or celebration would Charity’s family get to taste meat. Our daughters’ eyes got big as they realized that we had meat almost every day and sometimes twice a day!

Charity explained to us that the majority of her school-age days, she and her siblings only ate breakfast because their family did not have enough money to buy food for multiple meals a day. She always ate as much as she could for breakfast knowing it might be nearly 24 hours until her next meal. Charity was able to attend school, which served lunch, if she could afford it. Charity usually had to sit through much of the school day with a growling stomach. And she reminded us that even her breakfast was not fancy or delicious or full of variety. It was not made up of bacon, eggs, pancakes with butter and syrup, fruit, and milk or juice. Instead, she ate a simple dish called matoke. Matoke is essentially a mash made of a starchy variety of banana. That was the only option. If you didn’t eat it, then you didn’t eat … so Charity ate matoke day after day after day. And she did not top it off with granola and berries or eat it alongside two sausage links and toast. “Did you like matoke?” we asked her. She smiled and replied, “It didn’t matter if we liked it! We LOVED matoke simply because it was food, and we were hungry! My brothers and sisters and I were always thankful for a big plate of matoke.”

It was a fascinating and educational dinner with our dear Ugandan friend, and her stories reminded our entire family of the luxury of our lives compared to so many members of our global family.

I wish I could tell you that our girls have not complained at all about food since that dinner with Charity a few months ago. But we have heard different comments as well. Periodically, at lunch or dinner, instead of a complaint, one of the girls will exclaim, “I can’t believe some people only get meat once a year!” Other times we hear something like, “We get to eat so many kinds of food, and some people have to eat one kind all of the time!”

PASS THE MATOKE
God is using our relationship with Charity to slowly change our daughters’ hearts and attitudes (and ours too!). It’s leading to action. As a family, we are experimenting with ways of eating more simply to remind ourselves of all those who do not have sufficient nutrition each day. Entitlement is ever so gradually being replaced with appreciation. Complaints are fewer (for now), and thankfulness is more common at our dinner table. Our family is becoming more grateful because of Charity. Hopefully we can spread that gratitude to others. And my daughters and Charity are hopeful that someday they can all travel to Uganda and sit together and eat and be thankful for a big plate of matoke!

**A note to parents:** Obviously our goal as parents is not simply to raise children who are not overly picky about what they eat (or wear, or play with, etc.). It is much bigger (and more revolutionary!) than that. We hope to create environments and experiences in which our children’s hearts and minds can grow in gratitude and thankfulness rather than in entitlement. The world already has plenty of entitlement. Let’s model a new and healthier way to live!

*by Jason Kliewer*

Jason is a teaching pastor at Canopy Church in Orange County, CA. He lives with his wife and two daughters in a 200-square-foot RV camper. Jason loves to hear from readers, so feel free to send any comments or questions to: jasonmkliwer@gmail.com
These adorable Praying Hands will make a great addition to your table during your feast of thankfulness! Place one at each place setting as a reminder to your friends and family that you thank God for them. You can also use these hands as a prompt to talk about giving thanks in all circumstances.

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- light brown card stock
- scissors
- pencil
- Give Thanks decoration found at bit.ly/HFGiveThanks
- glue stick

WHAT YOU’LL DO

1. Fold a sheet of card stock in half.
2. Place your hand with your fingers close together on the folded card stock and trace your hand and wrist.
3. Cut out the traced hand while the card stock is folded so you will end up with two hand cutouts.
4. Level the wrist sections off by cutting a nice straight line.
5. Glue the fingertips together.
6. Add your decoration to the outside.
7. Place the hands on the table with the base spread apart.

by Debbie Guinn
Turkey Feathers

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- download and print out 1 turkey per player from bit.ly/HFTurkey
- card stock or cardboard
- scissors
- glue
- black permanent marker
- 6 clothespins per player
- autumn-colored paint or markers
- 1 dice

BEFORE YOU START ...

Allow your children to paint or color all of the clothespins. Have fun decorating them in beautiful autumn colors. These will eventually become the “turkey feathers.”

You will need to create one turkey for each player. To do this, download and print the turkey from bit.ly/HFTurkey. Cut the turkey out and then glue to cardboard or card stock and trim to fit the turkey.

Once your turkeys are cut out, write the numbers 1 through 6 on the top edge of each turkey. These numbers should be evenly spread out across the top arch of the turkey body.

Before welcoming in the group of players, make sure all the turkey feathers are dry and ready to go. Have players sit in a circle around a table or on the floor. Place a pile of decorated clothespins in the center of the circle along with the single dice. Place one turkey body in front of each player. Now you are ready to begin!

TIME TO PLAY!

Select a player to begin. This player will roll the dice. Once the dice reveals a number, the player will take a clothespin from the center and clip it over the number rolled and pass the dice to the next player. The next player will take his or her turn at rolling the dice and clipping the number rolled.

The game will go on by repeating the same pattern, but once a number is covered, it is no longer in play. So, if a player rolled a two in the first round, clipped it, and then rolled a two in the second round, then he simply passes the dice to the next player. Players will continue to take turns rolling and clipping until one person has all numbers covered. The first person to cover all her numbers wins!

by Heather DePartee

Heather worked in children’s ministry for seven years and recently earned her degree in early childhood development. She is now working on her Multiple Subject Teaching Credential and MA in teaching at Fresno Pacific University in Fresno, CA. She is in love with her husband, Adam, and all of their adorable houseplants!
REMEMBER!

Fun moments with family such as this can create lasting memories and funny stories to share and reminisce about later. As your family gathers and your home fills with laughter and storytelling, encourage your children to share stories of God and the work He has done in and for them or the ways in which they have seen Him move. This is a perfect opportunity to teach your children about the feasts and festivals God's people used to have to give thanks and share stories of His goodness. We, too, can live this way by using times of thankfulness to intentionally set aside time to gratefully share stories of all He has done.
HOW TO BUILD A BOARD

**First choose your board.** This can be a cutting board, a serving tray, a sheet pan, or even a large serving platter. The key is to spread the food out in a pleasing way. Your family can pick and choose and nibble on whatever they feel like eating throughout the morning.

Be sure to include your family’s favorites—here are a few suggestions.

- hard-boiled eggs
- donuts
- French toast sticks (see recipe next page)
- banana muffins (see recipe page 26)
- fresh fruit: strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, peaches, pears, grapes, cherries, kiwi, figs, nectarines, mandarin oranges, apples
- cheese: cheddar, brie, gouda, blue cheese
- meat: prosciutto, bacon, salami, smoked salmon, Canadian bacon
- nuts: pecans, walnuts, almonds, cashews
- crackers
- jams and jellies
MAKE-AHEAD FRENCH TOAST STICKS

YIELDS: 24 French toast sticks  |  PREP: 10 min.  |  COOK: 25 min.

* For an easy metric conversion chart, search the Internet for “metric kitchen.”

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

• 6 slices Texas toast (or other hearty, thick-cut bread)
• 3 eggs
• 1/2 cup milk
• 1 tablespoon melted butter, slightly cooled
• 1 teaspoon vanilla
• 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
• 1/4 cup granulated sugar

WHAT YOU’LL DO

1. Preheat oven to 350° F.
2. Spray a baking sheet with nonstick spray and set aside.
3. Cut bread slices into fourths and set aside.
4. In a large shallow dish, whisk together eggs, milk, melted butter, vanilla, and cinnamon.
5. Dunk bread sticks into batter, let excess drip off, and then place onto prepared baking sheet.
6. Sprinkle 1/4 cup granulated sugar on top.
7. Bake for 25 minutes.
8. To freeze: Let French toast sticks cool on the baking sheet and freeze in the freezer. Transfer to a freezer bag or container when hard.
9. To reheat, microwave for 30–60 seconds.

WHEN IT COMES TO PREPARING A FEAST OF THANKFULNESS, YOUR FOCUS IS USUALLY ON THE AFTERNOON OR EVENING MEAL. AS YOU WORK HARD PREPPING THIS MEAL, YOUR LITTLE ONES (AND YOUR BIG ONES TOO) ARE STILL HUNGRY FOR BREAKFAST AND NEED SOMETHING TO TIDE THEM OVER UNTIL THE MAIN EVENT. BUILDING A BREAKFAST BOARD IS EASY TO DO, AND WITH A LITTLE BIT OF PREP AHEAD OF TIME YOU CAN KEEP EVERYONE SATISFIED.
When Grandma Ruby passed away four years ago, I wanted to make sure each granddaughter and great-granddaughter would be able to carry on the tradition of storytelling while making her banana bread. So I gathered up all of her house dresses and turned them into aprons. On the back of each apron, I ironed on the banana bread recipe she had taught me so long ago and added her signature from a letter. I now entrust Grandma Ruby’s recipe to you. May you join in the joy of making it and sharing it with others along with a good story.

Growing up with a grandma who loved baking has made me a bread-loving, pie-eating, storytelling adult. My memories of being in the kitchen with my grandma rolling out pie crusts go back to age three. While I never mastered my grandma’s ability to make the perfect pie crust or a nonrunny pie filling, she did declare I made a masterpiece of her banana bread recipe. The two of us were all about taste testing and storytelling.
Ruby’s Banana Bread

YIELDS: 3 loaves or 36 muffins  |  COOK: 65-70 min. for loaves or 20-25 min. for muffins

* For an easy metric conversion chart, search the Internet for “metric kitchen.”

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- 3 1/2 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 3 cups sugar
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 4 eggs
- 2/3 cup water
- 6-7 frozen ripe bananas

WHAT YOU’LL DO

Encourage your child to help you!

1. Preheat the oven to 350° F.
2. Grease the bread pans or line the muffin tins.
3. Thaw bananas and squeeze all the juice into a large mixing bowl. This helps makes the richest and moistest banana bread.
4. Combine all the ingredients with the thawed and juiced bananas and beat until mixed well.
5. Pour the mixture evenly into multiple bread pans or muffin tins without overfilling.
6. Bake bread pans for 65-70 minutes or muffins for 20-25 minutes, or until toothpick comes out clean.
At creation, God set in motion His plan for His people to recognize and experience the wondrous lights in the sky, the sun and moon, as markers of days and seasons that would signal the rhythms for planting and harvesting, working and resting, remembering and celebrating.

The Israelites’ lifestyle would be a continual worship response to God, setting them apart from the other nations while passing on truths and traditions through ritual and storytelling. As God's people observed His appointed feasts and festivals (Leviticus 23:2), God called them to relationship and to a remembrance of His faithful and wondrous deeds.

THE LORD’S APPOINTED FEASTS AND FESTIVALS

Passover: God as Deliverer. The Israelites celebrated their deliverance from the Egyptians as well as God as their deliverer. In the New Testament, Jesus became the sacrificial Lamb of Passover to offer deliverance from sin for people from every age.

Unleavened Bread: God as Redeemer. This feast celebrated God’s miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt. In the New Testament, Jesus broke unleavened bread with His disciples and said, “This is My body.” Jesus was without sin as His body was broken during His crucifixion to deliver us from the bondage of sin.

First Fruits: God as Trustworthy. First Fruits represented the joyous occasion of the first grain harvest of the spring. In the New Testament, Jesus resurrected as the “first fruits” offering on Sunday, the day after the Passover Sabbath.

Harvest or Pentecost: God’s Abundant Provision. Pentecost, which means “50 days,” corresponded with the nation’s harvest season. This feast recognized when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. The Israelites celebrated a season of gladness and thanked God for abundantly providing for their physical and spiritual needs. The New Testament fulfillment came when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon all flesh in Acts 2.

Trumpets: God’s Faithfulness. This feast was the first of the fall feasts. It consisted of a time of rest, a food offering, and the blowing of the trumpets. Watchfulness was a critical ingredient of the feast. This need for watchfulness and preparedness with the Feast of Trumpets is echoed throughout the New Testament in connection with the Lord’s second coming.

Day of Atonement: God’s Righteousness. This reflective festival consisted of fasting, prayer, and repentance. The high priest passed through the
veil of the Holy of Holies with sacrificial blood to make atonement for the sins of the people. The New Testament significance lies in Christ, our High Priest, who shed His blood once and for all to make atonement for our sins before God.

**Feast of Tabernacles: God’s Abundant Blessings.** God’s people celebrated this festival with thanksgiving to remember God’s many blessings. For seven days they lived in tents or temporary shelters. The New Testament significance reminds us that this life is temporary and that our future home and inheritance is with Jesus.

**HEAR IT**
After reading Leviticus 23 as a family, discuss the following questions.

- After reading this passage, what do you think about God?
- Why do you think God wanted His people to keep feasts and festivals?
- What times of the year and in what ways do you remember and celebrate?
- How do you show that you are thankful to God for all He has provided for you?
- What is your favorite time of the year to celebrate? Why?

**DO IT**
Observing the festivals and feasts provided a way for every generation to encounter the true and living God through hearing His story. Israel remembered and celebrated with eating, singing, dancing, offering sacrifices, and sharing with those in need.

Create an atmosphere of remembering and celebrating in your home. Decide on a time this month to create a festive place to gather and express your thankfulness to God. Make a favorite family meal or just do dessert. Dress up, use party hats and balloons, and share stories of God’s goodness and faithfulness to your family—past, present, and promises He’s made to you for your future.


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*by Laurie Bennett*

Laurie has a heart to disciple children by creating environments to allow them to practice hearing God’s voice and by leading them to respond in worship. Married for 23 years and the mom of three wonderful kids (ages 22, 20, and 15), Laurie enjoys each moment spent with her family along with camping and hiking. Laurie has been involved in children’s ministry for more than 20 years and is currently the Director of Early Childhood at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, CO.
WHEN YOU ARE at Home

THESE COMMANDMENTS THAT I GIVE YOU TODAY ARE TO BE ON YOUR HEARTS. IMPRESS THEM ON YOUR CHILDREN. TALK ABOUT THEM WHEN YOU SIT AT HOME AND WHEN YOU WALK ALONG THE ROAD, WHEN YOU LIE DOWN AND WHEN YOU GET UP. (DEUTERONOMY 6:6–7)

Parents, reminding our little ones to be grateful is some of the most important work we do. Sing this sweet rhyme to the tune of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” as a reminder that we have a lot to be thankful for!

Thank you for animals
All my friends, and happy things
Thank you, Lord, for loving me
And loving the whole world

Get the audio recording of this song at bit.ly/novtottimerhyme

by Izzi Ray
Izzi was born in southern California but raised in Northwest Montana. She began playing guitar and writing songs at the age of 11. Her songwriting philosophy has always been “Be nothing but honest and real.” She has released three full-length albums to date (her self-titled debut in 2012, Make Much of You in 2014, and Liminality in 2017). Izzi currently resides in Southern California with her husband, dog, and cat.

@izziray
God’s creativity is as endless as His goodness. Each baby born is a little minstrel joining the league of storytellers—destined to voice an adventure worth witnessing, recording, and retelling. Isn’t that what we confirm when we take endless pictures, record every new word, and celebrate even the mundane milestones such as pulling the first tooth? We document and share our children’s stories, all because we’ve grasped the secret to God’s creativity: uniqueness.

My child’s first step is not your child’s first step. And every step after that will pitter patter a rhythm no other child can ever copy. God endowed each child with his own gifts and good works prepared beforehand for him to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). Each one will walk at her own pace and will be known by her gait. Some will be runners, others dancers, and there will be wanderers and marching soldiers too. The good works prepared for these children will be as unique as their first words: taking the lead in spiritual battle for some (maybe the ones who said very loud “nos” as their first words!), teaching and training in His Word for others, and care for the suffering for yet another group of them.

The way they go will become their story but also God’s story—walking and talking, working and witnessing, prospering and praising. Those kids who grow to be supporting characters with God as the Lead in His story will experience the thrill of being history makers. Some, sadly, may choose to be the main characters in their own stories instead and miss out on the stuff of legends.

They could be Pauls and Joshuas, Ruths and Marys, and even better—their true selves!

READ PSALM 71:15–16 NIRV OVER YOUR CHILD:

I will tell other people about all the good things you have done. All day long I will talk about how you have saved your people. But there’s no way I could say how many times you’ve done this. LORD and King, I will come and announce your mighty acts. I will announce all the good things that you alone do.

BLESS

Precious (child’s name), you are born to tell a story nobody has ever told—your story. I pray you will believe that your story is worth living and worth telling. The best parts are when Jesus is the hero of your story. May you talk more about Him than about anyone or anything else. I bless you to be a Jesus-storyteller who will remember everything He’s done and tell others about Him too.

by Hettie Brittz

Hettie is a South African-born author, international speaker, and foremost voice in parenting advice and personality styles. She is the author of (un)Natural Mom, the developer of the Evergreen Parenting Course, and the codeveloper of Tall Trees profiles. Hettie and her husband, Louis, have three children. Hettie’s latest book, Growing Kids with Character: Nurturing Your Child’s Potential, Purpose, and Passion, is available in print and digital editions everywhere books are sold.
WHERE IN THE WORLD IS ...

CHINA

The People’s Republic of China (PRC), the third-largest country in the world after the former USSR and Canada, claims an area of 3,705,406 square miles. China’s territory includes several large islands, the most important of which is Hainan off the south coast. China is bordered on the north by Mongolia and Russia; on the northeast by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; on the east by the Yellow and the East China seas; along the south by Hong Kong, Macau, the South China Sea, the Gulf of Tonkin, Vietnam, and Laos; on the southwest by Myanmar, India, Bhutan, and Nepal; on the west by India, Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan (west of the Karakoram Pass), and Afghanistan; and on the northwest by Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.
Now that we know where in the world China is, let’s meet and greet the people.

There are over 1.41 billion people who call China their home.

If you lived in China you most likely would NOT attend church. The majority of the population is atheistic—people who disbelieve or lack belief in the existence of God or gods.

Religion: Atheism 61%, Taoist or Confucian philosophies 26%, Buddhism 6%, Christianity 2%

If you lived in China you would speak Chinese. To say, “Hello” you would say, “Ni hao” (pronounced NEE HOW).

Rice is China’s staple food. The Chinese word for rice is *fan*, which also means “meal.” Rice may be served with any meal and is eaten several times a day. Scallions, bean sprouts, cabbage, and ginger root are other traditional foods. Soybean curd, called tofu, is an important source of protein for Chinese people. Vegetables play a central role in Chinese cooking, too.

DID YOU KNOW?

- In China, it is considered inappropriate to use knives on the dining table. Chopsticks are the main eating utensils for Chinese food, and they can be used to cut and pick up food. Chopsticks were made over 5,000 years ago and were used for cooking not eating.
- Chinese brides often wear red, a color considered to be lucky.
- China is the owner of all pandas. Literally, all of them! Every single panda that lives in this world belongs to China. If you see a panda in another country, it means it is lent from PRC (People’s Republic of China).

The Chinese celebrate an annual holiday around the 15th day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar. The celebration, known as the Mid-Autumn Festival, typically falls in late September or early October, when the moon is fullest and brightest. Much like American Thanksgiving, the festival originated as a holiday to express gratitude for the changing of the seasons and to celebrate the fall harvest.

There are several notable differences between Mid-Autumn Festival and American Thanksgiving. For one, the Chinese holiday is much older. The holiday’s roots can be traced back more than 2,500 years, long before Europeans ever set foot in the new world. Additionally, rather than Thanksgiving staple of pumpkin pie, the favorite Chinese dessert is moon cake, a baked concoction filled with sesame seeds, ground lotus seeds, and duck eggs.
God, Thanks
FOR THE FLEAS

SINCE WE’RE TALKING ABOUT STORYTELLING, ALLOW ME TO TELL YOU A STORY ABOUT SOME FLEAS.

A STORY TO ENJOY
In her book The Hiding Place, Corrie ten Boom recalls the time she and her sister first entered the barracks at the Nazi prison camp they were assigned to during World War II. The space was cramped. The smells were foul. The beds were soiled. The groans of sick and dying filled the air. Even more, when they wearily crawled into their bunks to rest, they soon realized the beds were infested with fleas.

In the midst of their bewilderment, Betsie, Corrie’s sister, remembered a Scripture they had read earlier that day:

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

She exclaimed, “That’s it, Corrie! That’s His answer. ‘Give thanks in all circumstances!’ That’s what we can do. We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this new barracks!” So, though they didn’t see any good in most of their circumstances (this was especially true for Corrie), they both began to thank God for everything around them, including the fleas.

Throughout their time at the prison camp, the sisters led Bible studies in their barracks where many women came to know and love Jesus as their Savior. They always marveled that the guards never stopped their meetings. In fact, the guards never once entered the barracks during Bible study. Later, Betsie found out why and told Corrie: the guards never entered the barracks because of the fleas. When Corrie heard this from Betsie, she wrote, “My mind rushed back to our first hour in this place. I remembered Betsie’s bowed head and I remembered her thanks to God for creatures I could see no use for.” They both realized what had happened: God had protected them and their ministry with His glorious army of fleas.

A TRUTH TO TRUST
Though this happened in a different land at a different time to different people, the truth remains the same: we can truly give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:18) because we have a sovereign God who graciously works in all circumstances, even when they’re infested with fleas. God Himself promises us this very thing in Romans 8:28: “For those who love God all things work together for good” (ESV). Though we may not know how God is working in our present circumstances, we can trust that He is working in them for our eternal good.

But how can we be sure He’s working for our good and hasn’t given up on us? Simple: the cross. As Paul argues a few verses later in Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (ESV). In other words, if God gave up His Son for us while we were sinners, we
can be sure He’ll work for our good now we are sons and daughters. So, to recall Babbie Mason’s words inspired by Charles Spurgeon, “God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken, so when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart” (emphasis added).

A QUESTION TO EXPLORE

So ask yourself and your middle schooler this question: “What are your fleas, and how is God calling you to respond to them?” Once we find ourselves in God’s big story of salvation, we might find ourselves saying something surprising, like, “God, thank you for the fleas.”


by Dana Dill

Dana is a high school Bible and theology teacher at Capistrano Valley Christian School and an adjunct professor at Biola University in Southern California. He is husband to his beautiful wife, Chawna, and daddy to his three precious children.

@danagdill
@danagdill
It was annoying to wake up at 5:00 a.m. to drop off balloons and an obnoxiously large, anonymous card decorated with outdated puffy paint for my dad’s sisters on Valentine’s Day every … single … year. And, of course, I would think it was obnoxious and annoying—I was in high school.

Not only were we driving for hours to drop off these anonymous gifts, but it seemed somewhat pointless because my aunts would obviously know these gifts were from our family because my dad had always dropped off anonymous Valentine’s Day gifts for them since he was in high school. He always wanted them to know that no matter what, someone found them special and worthy of love. Cute, I know. I just didn’t think so at 5:00 a.m.

I didn’t appreciate it at the time because it felt impossible to think outside myself during my teenage years, but now I can’t help but be thankful. My parents were always intentional to not only claim they were “thankful for family” each Thanksgiving over dinner but also to prove it throughout the rest of the year. I always knew whom my parents were thankful for, not because of their answers to the Thanksgiving Day question but because of where they actually spent their time.

“Time is money,” they say. I don’t even know who “they” are, but if I met “them” I’d clarify and agree that time can be spent making money, but then I would go on to argue that the most important thing about time is that it is valuable. Where we choose to spend our time is where we’re choosing to invest our lives. And we invest in the people and places we’re most thankful for.

For this reason, I have officially changed my token introductory question for any new friend from “What do you do?” to “What do you do with your time?”

Most people answer with what their job is, which is pretty normal. I’ve noticed that stay-at-home parents greatly appreciate the slightly adjusted question as they proudly share how they’re currently spending a lot of their time with their kids. Sometimes, though, people ask for clarification. Of course I love this as I leap onto my soapbox.

They ask, “Do you mean, what do I do for a living?”

I respond, “Nope, I’m asking where you’re choosing to invest your time. Where you choose to spend your time is where you’re investing your life. If you merely answer with what you do for a living, I’ll miss out on the reasons why you work there. Not only do I want to know where your time goes, but I want to know why your time goes there. Oftentimes it’s the reason why we do what we do that showcases what is most valuable in our lives. And the places or people you find valuable are the people you’re most thankful for.”

By asking, “What do you do with your time?” my new friend and I get the opportunity to move past surface answers and on to more important answers like why we do what we do. Oh, and sometimes we even get into hobbies. Remember those?

My parents still invest their time (and even their creativity) in being actively thankful for their friends and family. They still throw annual block parties to love their neighbors, show up at odd hours of the night while dear friends undergo surgery, and drop off anonymous Valentine’s Day cards. I’m so thankful they live thankful lives.

Parents, remember, your time is valuable. Choose wisely where you spend it. In doing so, you’re not just merely saying you’re thankful—you’re showing it with your life. Oh, and give some grace today to your self-consumed high schoolers. Show that you’re not as obnoxious and annoying as they sometimes think you are.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- What do you do with your time?
- As your teenagers look at where you spend your time, what would they say you are thankful for?
- How can you creatively show whom you’re thankful for as a family this week?

by Megan Fate Marshman

Megan is the author of SelfLess: Living Your Part in the Big Story of God, leads the Women’s Ministry at Hume Lake Christian Camps in Hume, CA, shepherds young adults at Arbor Road Church in Long Beach, CA, and shares Jesus around the world. She is married to Randy, and they live in Long Beach, CA with their son, Foster.
LINA’S TIMELINE

Have you ever stood in front of a 3-D poster? While I have never successfully seen the picture hidden in the artwork, I was told if you stand super close and then back up holding your focus to one spot, you will be able to see the picture hidden inside the art clearly. Mothering reminds me of how impossible it has always been for me to see what is right before my eyes.

For 18 years I stood as close to my daughter as possible and studied her, trying to discover what was hidden inside. I desperately wanted to know how her story would unfold and know the beauty of God’s majesty and creativity in her. Suddenly, 18 years flew by, and I was preparing for her graduation party. Like many mothers, I had kept a hope chest of items over the years. As I hung them along our fence, marking her years with photos, outfits, artwork, writings, and so many cat items, I suddenly saw the beauty of what God had placed right before my eyes. The storyline on the fence revealed not only who she was and is becoming but also my story as her mom.

From the tiny pink preemie outfit that my two-pound daughter wore home from the hospital, all the way to the graduation gown at the opposite end of the storyline, these items revealed my dependency on God. Regardless of her size, her age, or her phase in life, my position of being on my knees asking God to protect her, grow her in wisdom, and help her find people who would bring out all He had for her didn’t waver. Her future was not dependent on my parenting—which was good because my parenting was sometimes messy and self-serving, unlike God’s parenting, which is always grace and love.
“Her future was not dependent on my parenting—which was good because my parenting was sometimes messy and self-serving, unlike God’s parenting, which is always grace and love.”

The storyline also revealed the power of identity. God blessed me to become a mother through adoption. Looking back at the picture of the judge holding my baby and giving me the title of mother, I saw a major event that shaped my identity. I dreamt from the start that the relationship with my daughter would be perfect, but there were days of brokenness because we were more concerned with ourselves. My daughter’s swim team items on the storyline reminded me of the season when together we discovered that our brokenness reveals God’s rescue. He made me a mom and her my daughter, but our identity needed to be focused on being daughters of the King. We are redeemed and forgiven through Jesus, lavished in grace, and heirs of His kingdom. We continue to learn that when we live transparently, we get to bless one another rather than impress one another.

My daughter’s storyline also revealed the power of relationships. We rejoiced in seeing the baby book full of photos of friends and families who visited when we brought her home, the book full of blessings at her confirmation, and the graduation words of wisdom people wrote that evening. We created many intentional moments to celebrate and remember God’s faithfulness. Just as God called His people to gather and tell stories of His faithfulness to the next generation, the storyline displayed the celebration of God weaving people into her life for different seasons to offer laughter, discipline, support, and deep friendships.

Her celebration storyline allowed each person God had brought into her life to be part of the artwork and beauty that made up her story. And when it was laid out on that fence, it was a reminder that our God is near, our God is good, and our God is faithful to finish what He starts. The storyline continues through this blessing:

Lina, we pray we have shown you what love looks like in a family. It’s messy but beautiful. You will discover that, through family, you have learned the skills to communicate, encourage, challenge, forgive, grow, and accept others. Family is more than the immediate. It’s the people you allow to share in the story God has written for you. As your family is extended with roommates, college friends, and others, we pray God will grow you in positive ways with the gifts He has given to them.

We pray God will remain near to you. May He keep His hand of protection on your life. May He guide your footsteps as you embark on this new journey. May He give you the wisdom that will cause Him delight in the work He has for you. May the road before you be paved with opportunities you could never imagine.

by Dawn Heckert

Dawn is the Children's Pastor at Christ Community Church Leawood Campus in Leawood, KS. She loves Jesus and the opportunity to share His story with all ages. She spends her free time deep in glitter, crafting, creating, and chasing life with her two teenage daughters and husband.
When I was in grade school, my favorite book series was Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA). There was something incredibly empowering about these stories. Whereas regular books with a single storyline allowed me to maintain a passive posture, CYOAs forced me to actively participate in the arc of the story. Every page or two, I had to make a choice: go right or go left; open the door or go get help. And the outcome of those choices wasn’t always positive—sometimes I hit a dead end. Not only was this a realistic reflection of our sin-scarred world where things don’t always work out, but it taught me that my choices have consequences. I began to sit and think before I chose whether to turn right or turn left.
Today I am the father of two young boys who are rapidly becoming men. They are ten and seven, and every day they face choices at school and with peers that have very real consequences. As their father, I can’t follow them around and make those choices for them. However, I do have a responsibility to teach them how to make wise decisions; I need to train them to think before acting and to consider the effect their choices will have on others, not just themselves. But I don’t want to lecture them. What kid responds well to that approach?! Mine sure don’t. Instead, one of the tools I’ve used is a CYOA approach to bedtime stories.

My boys love bedtime stories, particularly the ones I make up in which they are the main characters. But as they’ve grown older, I’ve changed the way I tell those stories. Rather than simply entertaining them—they get enough of that as it is—I’ve sought to teach them through those stories. And that’s where CYOAs come in. Rather than simply telling a story, I pause at key moments where a decision has to be made and ask my sons to decide what to do.

“Suddenly, the boy bursts into tears. How do you respond?”

“As you’re running by, you see the purse lying on the ground. What do you do?”

This approach is helpful for a number of reasons. First, it invites them into the story to be an active participant rather than simply a passive observer. It also offers me a glimpse into my boys’ hearts so I can see their natural inclinations. Best of all, it affords me an opportunity to indirectly train my boys through storytelling. Once they tell me how they’d respond, we play the scenario out and, just like those CYOA stories of my youth, things don’t always work out the first time. But unlike real life, during story time there are do-overs. We can rewind the story to that decisive moment and choose a different approach.

By the way, this also works with Bible study. When my boys and I read a story in one of the gospels, rather than charging through it, I will take my time and look for opportunities to invite them into it.

So Jesus looks up to Zacchaeus in the tree and says, “Zacchaeus, come down, because I’m going to eat at your house today.” How would you have felt if you had been in the crowd and Jesus had chosen to eat with a known thief?

Jesus looks at the rich young man and says, “One thing you lack: sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and then come follow me.” What would you have done if you had been in that young man’s shoes? What would you have had the hardest time selling?

Storytelling is powerful, particularly when we allow our children to be active participants in the stories we tell. So give it a try. You just might find that your bedtime stories get better when your children get to join you on the adventure.

by Eric Wayman

Eric Wayman is the lead pastor of Lighthouse Community Church in Costa Mesa, CA, and the author of Reclaiming Your Identity. He also teaches at Vanguard University and loves getting to disciple people who are hungry to grow. He and his wife, Cathy, are raising their two sons to be men of God.

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The Unexpected Step
I’m guessing you can imagine a couple’s delight when they see a positive pregnancy test after struggling with infertility. But how about the shock when they discover they aren’t pregnant with just one baby ... or even two ... or even three, but quadruplets?! My husband and I had adopted our son, Jeremiah, just two years earlier and were only trying to give him a sibling, not start a basketball team.

While our pregnancy was a shock to us, God was prepared to carry us through the twists and turns and ups and downs of the rollercoaster ride we’ve experienced during the last three years. In His faithfulness to us, He has rescued us emotionally, physically, and mentally over and over again.

My pregnancy was incredibly difficult. Our baby Lena stopped growing at 19 weeks gestation, and three times, doctors told us we were going to lose her in utero. But it was actually Oliver who instigated a speedy delivery of all four babies at 26 weeks and 5 days when he began to show signs of distress. Mavis, Amos, and Oliver all weighed between one and two pounds each while Lena, our tiniest, was only 15 ounces. Lena was a fighter! Sadly, only 10 hours after a smooth delivery, we said goodbye to our precious Oliver before we ever got to hold him.

In the midst of our grief, we still had four children who needed our attention and love—especially Lena, who continued to battle for her life during her 10-month NICU stay. Three more times after delivery, doctors told us she wouldn’t make it, and one instance was so dire we had to have a DNR (do not resuscitate) conversation with the doctors. After burying Oliver, this conversation was the second-hardest thing Nick and I have ever done.

But God has continued to show off in Lena’s life! In several frightening moments, doctors told us there was absolutely NO medical reason Lena should have survived. God, in His loving kindness, literally rescued her. Our little fighter baby came home after 304 days in the hospital with a tracheotomy, a vent, oxygen, a gastrostomy tube, and several diagnoses that might have tanked another kid. But this fall, Lena and her siblings—all healthy at three years old—started preschool!

Lena’s first day of preschool felt surreal as we reflected on what she had come through. We are overwhelmed with gratitude and wonder for Lena’s future. Already, she has more courage, determination, and joy in her tiny body than most people you will ever meet. She lets exactly zero things slow her down. Lena has gritted her teeth and fought through every single thing life has thrown at her, and I am continually amazed at her resilience. She is joy personified! And while doctors once told us that she may never walk or talk, let alone go to school, Lena walked herself into preschool with no oxygen and no vent and had the time of her life!

We will tell Lena’s story to her and others as a reminder that God is faithful. He loves each of us and is working all things together for good.

by Emily Beydler

Emily lives in Columbia, MO, with her saint of a husband, Nick, who not only loves her and their four amazing/wild kids incredibly well but also puts up with all of her shenanigans. These include but are not limited to frequent “adventures” to her favorite coffee shop followed by trips to Target for no reason (keeping everyone together in public is both a sport and a spectacle, so why not?), volunteering together in the early childhood ministry at their church (because the preschool class they’re raising isn’t enough fun), coordinating outfits for every major holiday/birthday/photography session, and themed family Halloween costumes. Before staying home with her tiny army, Emily worked in student ministry for several years and still thinks middle school kids are the coolest.

The Beydler Bunch
A popular song I remember from growing up in the church was called “Beauty for Ashes.” I always loved this song because I resonated with the idea that God can take the darkest parts of our lives and somehow make them beautiful. While I believed this to be true, for much of my life I hadn’t truly experienced life in the form of ashes. That’s not to say that I didn’t experience my share of challenges and loss, but I had not yet reached a point of total desperation and dependence on God.

That all changed in 2015. After 12 years of marriage, my husband and I were in the midst of a storm that could very well have ended our marriage. We were completely broken as we realized just how fragile our marriage was. I’ll never forget the feeling of wondering if we would make it and even if it was worth fighting for. Thankfully, we had just enough wisdom to move forward by confronting brokenness, taking time to heal, and choosing to build a new marriage. I can tell you that confronting the ashes in our marriage was a long journey, but it was worth it.

One Scripture I had known for years became very real during that season. In Psalm 18, David writes, “You protect me with salvation-armor; you hold me up with a firm hand, caress me with your gentle ways. You cleared the ground under me so my footing was firm” (vv. 35-36 MSG). The Bible is full of stories where God brought hope and new life to people in desperate situations. God promises that when we walk through difficulty, He is not only walking with us, but He protects us, holds us up, and helps us to find our footing.

For many years I believed this to be true, and now our family has experienced God’s protection.
and help in powerful and lasting ways. We now celebrate our new and improved marriage while continuing to grow and build for our future. Our marriage is not perfect, but it is honest. We are still complete opposites and have our share of challenges, but this time we have the necessary tools to walk through challenges together. We have seen our family completely transformed, giving us glimpses of how a thriving marriage can look.

Perhaps you are in a difficult season in your life and wonder where God is. Your marriage and family may be broken, and it seems impossible to see a brighter future. It is in these seasons that thankfulness and gratitude become real. When we choose to put our hope and trust in God, I believe it is a powerful form of gratitude. As someone who has walked this journey, I am certain that even in our darkest moments, God is right there beside us. His love and His grace are enough, and it is when we receive His grace that we begin to find comfort and healing that leads to beauty. My hope for you is that you will not only recognize the ashes in your life but that you will invite God to turn those ashes into beauty.

by Heather Clements

Heather is a wife and mama of two kids in elementary school, where she serves on the PTA and dresses up as the school’s mascot. She works part-time at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, CA, and enjoys helping college students discover their passions. She loves to travel with her family, most recently spending an extended summer in a small village in the English countryside. However, being a native of Orange County, CA, her favorite place to be is on the sand at the beach.
So often in life we believe we have control over what’s going to happen. Not just over what is happening right now but what will happen. For those of you who are like my wife and me—prepared, informed, and scheduled—we believe everything will fall directly into place. To be honest, we derive a lot of satisfaction from everything going smoothly and easily. But God has a way of reminding us that we are not in control; He is.

Originally, we were tracking with our life plan. Family life was good, the kids were married and doing well, and work life was, well, work life. Our thought was that changes would happen but not changes to our current lifestyle, family, and friends. God had something different in mind. It would be a BIG change. It was big because our children were expecting a baby soon and, obviously, the first grandbaby would start new beginnings in many ways. Anticipation was high—everything according to plan.

We traveled to welcome our first granddaughter. She was healthy, but there was some additional news. She had Down syndrome. None of the family had any experience with Down syndrome, but God had blessed us with her, and we began the journey of loving and providing for her.

Soon after her birth a new job offer came about. During our discussion about taking the new job, we looked back at what our life had been like, what it would look like, and what we hoped would happen. We never planned on leaving my wife’s hometown where she had lived her whole life and where I had been for the last 35 years. Our kids were born there, went to school there, etc. Throughout our conversations we were struck with how thankful we were for God’s blessings over the last 30-plus years. Wonderful family, friends, church, and God’s provision even through very difficult times.

One of the deciding factors in taking the job offer was being closer to our daughter and son-in-law’s home. Granddaughter number two made her entry into the world a little over a year later. She was healthy like her sister but was diagnosed a short time later with autism. Two unique granddaughters, each designed by God, to have a family who would love and learn to care for them.

Although this did not match our life plan and there are challenges, God continues to work amidst our circumstances. We always pray that, despite our plans, God’s plan would be evident. God has continued to bless our family, and now we have granddaughter number three from our son and daughter-in-law. We could not be more thankful!

by Mark and Lynn Daniels

Lynn currently teaches Pre-K and has for more than 20 years in both private and public schools. She loves teaching that age group. Mark is currently a training program manager and an author and speaker.

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THE LORD IS GOOD TO EVERYONE. HE SHOWERS COMPASSION ON ALL HIS CREATION. ALL OF YOUR WORKS WILL THANK YOU, LORD, AND YOUR FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS WILL PRAISE YOU. (PSALM 145:9-10 NLT)
Advent Reading

This year Advent begins on Sunday, December 2 and ends on Monday, December 24. We have divided a nativity story into 23 days. Each day, read the previous days’ portions of the story and then add a new line for that day. Your family will quickly begin to memorize this narrative of Jesus’ birth. As you get further into the month, you might choose to leave out key parts and allow your children to fill in the blanks.

Download and print these story parts at: bit.ly/HAAdvent2018.

Then, cut them out and create a fun way to display them in your home. You could put them in envelopes, small bags or boxes, or even paste them on large tags and use clothespins to attach them to twine. Be sure to number each one to help build the anticipation for Christmas day.
1. A promise had been given. God wanted to live among His people. He wanted to forgive them once and for all. He would send a Redeemer!

2. How would you have sent the Savior of the world? Would you send a mighty warrior king? Would everyone bow when they saw Him? Would they stand at attention and listen to every word? Would there be celebration and fanfare?

3. God’s ways are often not our ways. He had a plan—a good and perfect plan. His entrance into the world would require us to use great faith to believe it. It was a miracle—what else would we expect from Him?

4. The timing was perfect. God had been silent, not speaking through a prophet, priest, or king for 400 years. God’s people were waiting.

5. God searched the earth for just the right people to carry out His plan. A young girl named Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph. Joseph was a descendant of King David.

6. One day the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that God was very pleased with her. Mary was afraid at first—but the angel reassured her and told her that she had found favor with God.

7. God had chosen to use Mary in His plan—He saw her faith and trust in Him. Gabriel told Mary that God had a surprise for her—“You will have a baby and His name will be Jesus! He will be God’s own Son—He is the Promise!”

8. Mary felt that all of this was too amazing to believe but Gabriel reminded her that nothing is too amazing for God. So, Mary put her faith in God—she said, “I am God’s servant, I will do whatever He asks me to do.”

9. Just about the time that Mary was ready to have her baby, Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. Everyone had to travel to the town of their ancestors to be accounted for.

10. Mary and Joseph had to go to the town of Bethlehem, the town King David was from. While they were there, the time came for Mary to give birth.

11. They searched high and low in Bethlehem looking for a place to stay, but there were no rooms—every bed was taken.

12. One of the innkeepers showed them the way to a dirty old stable—it was there in that stable, in the silence of night that God delivered His wonderful gift and fulfilled the promise He had made to His people.

13. Mary and Joseph wrapped Jesus up in blankets and laid him in a manger—a feeding trough for the animals. Mary and Joseph smiled and thanked God for giving them front row seats to watch His plan come to life.

14. Mary and Joseph named Jesus “Emmanuel,” which means God has come to live with us.” And that was exactly the truth!

15. Above the stable that night a new star appeared in the sky—one that shone brighter than all the others. God placed it there so everyone would know that His Son had been born. He couldn’t wait for the world to meet Him.

16. There were shepherds camping in the fields by the stable that night. They were watching over their sheep when suddenly an angel appeared to them. At first, they were frightened.

17. The angel told them, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide.”

18. The angel continued, “A Savior has just been born in David’s town, a Savior who is Messiah. This is what you’re to look for—a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.”

19. All at once an entire choir of angels filled the sky and sang out, “Glory to God and peace to all men and women on earth!” Then, as quickly as they appeared all the angels left.

20. The shepherds talked amongst themselves, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see what God has revealed to us!” They left running, leaving everything behind, and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger.

21. The shepherds tiptoed in and knelt on the dirt floor next to the baby. Seeing was believing—it was exactly as the angels had said.

22. God’s promise—the One that the shepherds had heard about their entire lives—was finally here. Jesus was here to save us—God sent His one and only Son!

23. Nothing would ever be the same. Jesus entered the world that holy night as a baby but grew into a man that gave His life for us all—all we have to do is to believe that Jesus is our newborn King!
10 ENVIRONMENTS

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

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

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

2 Out of the Comfort Zone
“God transforms me when I step out in faith.”

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

3 Love & Respect
“Asks the question, ‘What needs to be done?’”

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

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

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

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

The power of The Big God Story impacts our lives by giving us an accurate and awe-inspiring perspective into how God has been moving throughout history. It is the story of redemption, salvation, and hope and tells how I have been grafted into it by grace. It further compels us to see how God is using every person’s life and is creating a unique story that deserves to be told for God’s glory.
IT IS OUR PRAYER THAT HOMES AND CHURCHES WOULD CREATE THESE ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN TO LIVE IN SO THEIR FAITH WILL GROW IN A COMMUNITY OF CONSISTENCY, COMMON LANGUAGE, AND PRACTICE.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW THESE ENVIRONMENTS CAN IGNITE A TRANSFORMING FAITH IN YOUR FAMILY, WE SUGGEST YOU READ:

SPIRITUAL PARENTING: An Awakening for Today’s Families
BY MICHELLE ANTHONY © 2010 DAVID C COOK
INVITE YOUR KIDS INTO GOD'S BIG STORY

God created us to be in a relationship with Him, but that perfect relationship was tainted at the beginning of the story. But there's great news! It all ends the way it began in the garden—we get to have a relationship with God because of His redeeming love for us. When you read this book to your kids, they'll discover that they can have a part in God's Big Story too!

Michelle is the Executive Pastor of Family Ministries at New Life Church in Colorado Springs. CO. Michelle has graduate degrees in Christian education, theology, and leadership and more than 25 years of church ministry experience as a children’s and family pastor. She loves a good book and a cup of coffee.

Available in print and digital editions everywhere books are sold.